

SERMONS ON SEVERAL SUBJECTS.

By WILLIAM STEPHENS M.A. K
Sometime Fellow of *Exeter* College in *Oxford*,
and late Vicar of St *Andrew's* in *Plymouth*.

Vol. I.



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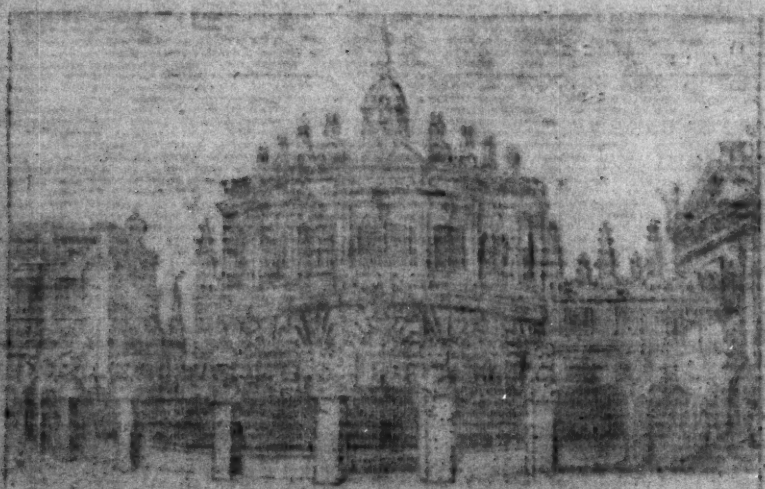
SERMONS

ON

SEVERAL

SUBJECTS.

By WILLIAM STERRENS M.A.
Sometime Fellow
and late Vice-Chancellor
of the University of Oxford



Oxford, Printed at the Theatre.
MDCCLXXII.

TO THE RIGHT REVEREND
THE LORD BISHOP
OF
EXETER;
AND
TO THE VERY REVEREND
THE DEAN and CHAPTER
OF EXETER.

My Lord, and Gentlemen,

PErmit me to dedicate to You this First
Volume of my late Husband's Sermons,
in Acknowledgement of the Great Fa-
vours he receiv'd from Your Venera-
ble Body.

He was nam'd by You to his Fellowship in
Exeter College. He was presented by You to
his first Preferment in the Church. And, the
Credit

Credit deriv'd to him from the Favours You were pleas'd to confer on him, was one of those many Considerations, which induc'd the Worthy Corporation of the Town of *Plymouth* to elect him their Vicar.

Had Providence permitted him a longer Enjoyment of Life, he would, no doubt, have express'd his Gratitude by inscribing to You Something more worthy of Your Name. But, as he is now lost to the World, and to his Family, it will be some Comfort to me under my Great Affliction, if You shall be pleas'd to accept this Dedication of his Remains, the only Acknowledgement that can be made by

My Lord, and Gentlemen,

12 JY 62

Dec. 20. 1736.

Your most Oblig'd,

most obedient

Humble Servant

GERTRUDE STEPHENS.

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A
All S
Adam
Arche
Ayere
Addis
Arche
Arche
Adey
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E

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Hoyle	Mr. John. ditto. ditto.	
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THIRTY FIVE
SERMONS

ON
SEVERAL SUBJECTS,
In Two VOLUMES.



in Two Volumes.

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SERMON I.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures, for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*



THE Command here given us, of Searching the Scriptures; and the Motive whereon it is founded, (*viz. that on our Knowledge of them depends our eternal Life*), have made a thorough Treatment of that Subject both useful and necessary. The Necessity therefore of the Revelation they contain; the Divine Authority of the Books themselves; their Fulness and Perfection; their Perspicuity and Clearness; the universal Right of reading them; and the several Duties relating to them, are what I propose to discuss in some Discourses from this Place.

But, there having arisen many Enemies and Opposers of the sacred Scriptures, and those of different Sects, Interests and Denominations; (some, with the *Atheist*, denying
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the very Being of a God, and consequently the very Possibility of a Revelation of his Will; others, with the *Deist*, confessing indeed a God, but denying that the Scriptures are any Revelation from him; others, with the *pretended* Catholick Church, acknowledging both a God and the Truth of the Scriptures, but withal detracting from their Perfection, denying their Perspicuity, and debarring Men of their Right to read them;) it is expedient to remove all these Prejudices, and clear the Scriptures from all their Objections.

In order to this, I have thought it most proper to begin with their First and Capital Enemies, the Denyers of a God; and pave the Way to a Demonstration of their Divine Original, by shewing that there is such a Being as God, to whom we ascribe them.

This Method is also the more convenient, because the Being of a God is the prime Supposition in this whole Affair; and upon which, as necessary Deductions, all our future Reasonings will depend. For, when it is once shewn, that there is such a Being as God, endow'd with all Perfections, and possess'd of the Attributes of infinite Holiness, Goodness, Wisdom and the like, these Attributes will be a Demonstration of his having reveal'd his Will to Man; and that this his Revelation is none other than what is contain'd

in

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in the Books of the Old and New Testament.

As the prime Foundation therefore of all our Reasonings against the Anti-Scripturists, of what Denomination soever, I lay it down as a Proposition to be prov'd in this Discourse, That there is such a Being as God; hereafter inferring, from his Nature and Attributes, the Divinity of the Scriptures, their Perspicuity and Perfection. The Subversion of *Atheism* must lead us in our Attacks on *Deism*; and to prove the Divine Original of the Scriptures, we must first evince a God to whom we attribute them.

But it may be enquir'd, by What Helps, by What Means and Steps do we arrive at the Knowledge of this Truth? What Evidences have we of this Belief; --- and from What Arguments do we collect it?

In Answer to this Enquiry, one Sort of Men assert, That the Acknowledgment of a God is natural to us; that our Souls come into the World with this Notion stamp'd and impress'd on them; that we have an innate Idea of his Being; and that the human Soul receives it at its Entrance into Life from the Supreme Being which gives Life.

But this Way of accounting for our Belief of a God, doth not seem satisfactory; there being no sufficient Proof, that the Soul of Man hath any innate Ideas at all; The human

Soul seeming, at its first setting out, to be, (like a clean Sheet of Paper,) capable indeed of receiving any Impressions and Characters, but in reality stamp'd and mark'd with none.

A Second Method assign'd by some Men, by which we arrive at the Knowledge of a God, is, That this Proposition [There is a God,] is a self-evident Proposition, From which the Mind of Man cannot with-hold its Assent, when let into the Meaning of it, and when the Terms of it are explain'd; -- That as no Man can disbelieve these Propositions, [The Whole is greater than a Part; and a Thing cannot *be*, and *not be* at the same Time,] so, by the same irresistible Evidence, the same clear and inseparable Connexion of the Terms in the Question, no Man can deny a God, when he is made sensible what we mean by these Words, *a God*, and *to be*.

But this Account also seems weak and defective; because, if it were, as is pretended, a self-evident Proposition, and From which the Mind of Man cannot with-hold its Assent, it would then be most plain, that there never was, nor ever can be such a Thing in the World as a Denyer of a God; no Man surely, that pretended to common Understanding and Knowledge, being capable of denying what is evident of itself. If therefore there have been, (and that there have, we have the

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greatest Assurance,) any such Men as have deny'd the Existence of a God, it apparently follows, that to all such Persons it hath not prov'd a self-evident Truth.

A Third Sort of Men have accounted for our coming to the Knowledge of a God by a Method almost quite contrary to those already mention'd; and that is, That the Being of a God is a Matter solely of Divine Revelation; That our Soul is created with no inherent Notion of it; That it is not a Truth so evident as irresistibly to force and extort a Confession from us; That we do not come to the Knowledge of it by any Use of our own Faculties; That it is not suggested to us by any natural Light, or by the Use of our native Reason; but entirely by the Revelation, which God hath made of it to us: --- That, had he never been pleas'd to have reveal'd to us his own Existence, and made himself known to us by Manifestations of himself, we had for ever continu'd in Ignorance of his Being; That there is Nothing in Nature, which could any ways help us to this Knowledge; and therefore it can be no otherwise deriv'd, than from God himself.

But this Account also hath its Difficulties: For, if the Being of a God were a Matter solely of Divine Revelation, and Mankind could never have had this Knowledge had not

God himself communicated it to them; How comes it to pass, that the most barbarous and unciviliz'd Parts of the World, (to whom it is certain God never vouchsaf'd any Revelation,) have yet infallible Marks of their Knowledge of a God? The innermost Inhabitants of *Africa* and *America*, (amongst whom scarce any other Footsteps of Reason or Humanity can be found,) do yet universally acknowledge and adore a God. There can be no Grounds to think they were ever favour'd with a Revelation from Heaven to this purpose; and there is as little Reason to suppose that they might have had this Information from some more Wise and Knowing Nations, with whom they might formerly converse, there being not the least Traces of such Conversation.

Thus, the Acknowledgment of a God, being neither an innate Notion of the Soul; nor a self-evident Proposition; nor a Matter solely of Divine Revelation; — some other Method must be devis'd, whereby this Truth may be deriv'd to us.

And this is the Fourth and most rational Account; viz. That we come to this Knowledge by several Steps and Degrees, as our own natural Faculties of Reason and Understanding begin more vigorously to exert themselves; That when Man reflects on all Things

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around him; enquires into their Original; observes their various Uses; discovers an admirable Contrivance and Wisdom in their Operations; these Thoughts and Reflections necessarily carry him to attribute all this to some wiser and more potent Cause than any of the Creatures.

Thus we trace a God by the Works of his Hands: Our own Reason and Observation clearly discover, that none but a Being of unbounded Power, infinite Wisdom, and immense Knowledge could frame this Universe; And from thence we as necessarily conclude, that there is such a Being, as we do, upon viewing the Footsteps of a Man, infer, that there was in that Place an human Foot, tho' we were not present when the Impression was made.

Having thus briefly shewn by what Means we come to the Knowledge of a God, I shall cast, what I have farther to observe, under the following Heads.

First, I shall explain to you (as far as our Reason is capable of comprehending it) The Notion of the Divine Nature; or What it is that we mean by God.

Secondly, I shall lay before you some Evidences of the Truth of his Existence, and at large prove that there is such a Being.

Lastly, From what shall have been said on

these two Heads, I shall make some Reflexions and Inferences, and so conclude.

1. First then, I am to explain to you (as far as our Reason is capable of comprehending it) The Notion of the Divine Nature; or What it is that we mean by God.

The Conceptions which we form of the Nature of God must necessarily be weak and imperfect; because Our Understandings are finite, His Nature infinite. The Name which God assumes to himself in Scripture [*Jehovah*] signifies, that He is underiv'd, unoriginated, and self-existent. And herein indeed is plac'd the first essential Attribute of The Divine Nature, viz. that it took its Beginning from no other Being; that it had no Cause of its Production; that it existed necessarily, and of itself; that it gave existence to all other Beings; and is the first Cause from whence all others are deriv'd, and on which they depend.

This is such a Perfection, as cannot be enjoy'd by any other Being in any Degree; but is altogether inseparable from the Nature of God. The other Perfections of God, (as his Power, Wisdom, Goodness, Justice, Mercy and the like,) He hath partly, and in lower Degrees communicated to his Creatures; but with this only Difference, that what is vested in our Nature, in small Proportions, and in inferior

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inferior Degrees, is infinitely extended in The Divine Nature, and knows no Limits of Perfection.

We observe a Gradation of Perfections thro' the whole Creation. As much as Brutes transcend the vegetable World, so much perfecter is the Nature of Man, than that of Brutes. Whatever Perfections therefore do in any Parts fall within our Observation, these we attribute and remove to the Nature of God; and imagine them to be there without Limitation and Bounds.

Thus we form a Notion of God's Nature (not indeed fully comprehensive, but yet sufficiently for our weak Conceptions,) by removing from it all Imperfections; and ascribing to it all the Excellencies, which any Nature is capable of possessing.

If it be said, that this is but a weak and imperfect Account of The Nature of God; we answer, that it is the best which our Understanding is capable of forming; and we have no Reason to be angry, that God hath not made us Gods like himself.

2. I proceed now, after thus explaining What we mean by a God, to lay before you, Secondly, some Evidences of the Truth of his Existence; and at large prove that there is such a Being.

The First Argument I shall produce to this Purpose

Purpose, shall be, That there is an absolute Necessity of allowing Something to have been from all Eternity, and to have no Beginning of Being. For, that Cause which was first, and which gave Rise to all other Beings, must have been eternal, and without Beginning; --- or it must have been produc'd by some other Cause, distinct from itself. But, it could not be produc'd by any other Being, because then itself would not be the First: Nor could the first Cause be its own Producer, it being impossible that any Thing can produce itself; it from thence necessarily following, that it operated before it was in Being, --- or, that it *was not*, and *was* at the same time; than which, Nothing can be a more apparent Contradiction.

Since therefore, for the Reason given, (that is, if all Things are suppos'd to have been made, it will follow, that Nothing could ever have been made, there being no Cause, or Agent to produce any thing,) it is absolutely necessary to fix on some first Cause, which gave Being to the rest, and which itself must never have begun to be: It follows, that Something must have been from all Eternity; Otherwise, Nothing could ever have been produc'd at all: And, if Something be confess'd to have been Eternal, That Being, (be it what it will,) we aver to be God; and are thus

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II

thus certified of the Truth of his Existence.

This Argument hath all the Force of a Demonstration. If we suppose Something to have been from all Eternity, we have then the Confession of a God; For, whatever is Eternal, is necessarily God. But, if any one should deny, that there was any Being from all Eternity, then he runs himself upon this unanswerable Difficulty; That if there were no first Cause, which was without Beginning, it inevitably follows, that never any Thing could have been brought into Being at all; since, upon this Supposition, there was Nothing existent in Nature to bring about, or forward such a Production; and it was impossible that any Thing could produce itself.

Either therefore, it must be asserted, That there is Nothing in Being at this Time, and that all the World is but a Delusion and Fantastical Appearance, without any real Subistence, (which I suppose no Man in his Senses will assert;) or, if there be any Thing really in Being, there must have been Something from all Eternity; or never any Thing could be brought into Being. As certain therefore as we are, that there are any Beings existent, so certain are we, that there is Something Eternal; and if Something is Eternal, we are sure that there is a God.

A Second Argument for the Being of a God,

God, is, The universal Consent and Agreement of Mankind; there being no Nation, (however barbarous in its Customs, and ignorant of Literature,) that has universally been Strangers to this Belief and Perswasion. Now, that Principle, in which there is so general a Concurrence of Mankind, carries with it the highest Degree of Probability, which any Thing, not capable of strict Demonstration, can possibly have; because it is morally impossible that the whole World should thus conspire to cheat themselves, to put a Delusion on the whole Race of Mankind, and to trick themselves into the Belief of what at the same Time they had no Proof of. Nothing less than the greatest and most apparent Evidence of the Truth of any Proposition can be suppos'd to extort so general a Confession of it.

Had indeed this Notion of the Being of a God been proper and peculiar to some few among the politer Sort of Nations; or had it been vented and impos'd in some of the most knowing and learned Ages; it might then with some Colour and Pretence of Reason have been said to be the Invention of some crafty Statesman to keep the Ignorant in Awe; or to be the Device of a Set of Wise Heads to procure a Fame and Reverence.

And, on the other Hand, had this Opinion been

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been found only among the more barbarous Nations; had it been the Growth only of the Desarts of *Africa*, or the Mountains of *America*, it might, plausibly enough, have been affirm'd to be only the Suggestion of the vain Fears, and imaginary Timorousness of those rude and ignorant Nations.

But, it having stood the Test of all Common-wealths, of whatever Character; it having been receiv'd in all Ages of the World, whether unlearn'd, or remarkable for Learning; and attested to by those Nations, which have been least chargeable with vain and groundless Fears; it appears, that this Acknowledgment of a God, stands on a surer Foundation, and is not liable to any such Objections.

It is true indeed, there is not this general Agreement to be found in their Manner of conceiving God; nor have all the several Nations the same Ideas of him. Some hold that there are two Infinite Principles, the One the Author of all Good, the Other the Fountain of all Evil. Some have maintain'd a greater Number of Gods, but those inferior and subordinate to each other; and Others have believed, that God is cloath'd with a material Body like that with which we are invested.

But, a Difference in their Sentiments as to parti-

particular Questions, is no valid Argument against the general Truth believ'd by them, but rather a clearer and more solid Proof of it. Whatever Errors they may have super-induc'd, and into whatever false Opinions their Ignorance may have betray'd them, yet it is plain, that all these suppose the principal Truth itself, That there is a Being over all Supreme; tho' in their farther Searches into his Nature, (not being directed by the Light of Revelation,) they have been lost and bewilder'd.

Thirdly, Another Argument to prove the Being of a God, shall be drawn from the Original of the World. We see before us a vast Terraqueous Globe, surrounded with almost numberless Bodies, contriv'd with that Art and Elegance, which no Malice can find Fault with, no Invention better or amend. But now, What gave Being to this curious Frame; and Whence doth it derive its Original? Surely from some great and wise Hand, which dispos'd all this mighty Piece in number, Weight and Measure. *The Heavens declare the Glory of God, and the Firmament sheweth his Handy-work. One Day telleth another, and one Night certifieth another.* And to the same Purpose St Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans; *The invisible Things of God from the Creation of the World are clearly seen, being understood by*

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the Things that are made, even his eternal Power and Godhead. Thus, the Original of the Universe demonstrates a God; and from the Wisdom of the Creation we irresistibly infer a Creator.

The Force and Solidity of this Argument will still more strongly be confirm'd, if we turn ourselves to consider the Weakness and Absurdities of Their Schemes, who have endeavour'd to subvert this Proof of a God; and to account for the Original of the World, as we now see it, without having Recourse to a Power of Creation, and without employing in it an Almighty Hand. Two Suppositions therefore have been given, how this World might exist, without the Help of a Creator, or God.

The One, That it was always in the same Condition, in which we now see it, from all Eternity; That it never had a Beginning at all; That, as it had no Beginning of Existence, so hath it run on in the same State and Condition for infinite Successions of Ages, and will continue to do so to all Eternity.

Now, this Supposition, (besides the Unreasonableness of asserting the Eternity of Beings so frail and corruptible, as we see the Principles of all Bodies are,) carries with it this manifest Absurdity, that it supposes there have

have already been *Infinite* Successions of Ages, and *Infinite* Successions of Men.

If so, then it is undeniable, that these *Infinite* Successions of Men are pass'd and ceas'd; because not now in Being: And this is plainly a Contradiction; it being as much as to say, that *Infinities* have an End.

Not to take Notice, that this Supposition carries with it the same Difficulty it is fram'd to avoid, viz. that of an Eternal Being. For, tho' they deny God to be Eternal, they are forc'd to attribute that Perfection to some other Being; and absurdly bestow it on this dull, unactive, material World, whilst they deny it to so pure, and spiritual a Being as God is.

The Other Supposition as to the Original of the World, without having Recourse to God for its Creation, is, That it might possibly be form'd by the mere Motions and Jumbings of Matter; That if we suppose an infinite Number of small Particles of Matter continually moving up and down in a vast void Expanse, a long Succession of Ages might possibly jumble them into that regular and beautiful Order in which the World is now compos'd: And thus, the Universe would be fram'd without the Assistance of a suppos'd God.

But here we answer, That (besides the Improbable

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probability of producing so regular and well-order'd a World out of ever-so-long a fortuitous Concourse of Particles of Matter;) it does not appear, Who first gave Being to this Matter itself; Who first put it in this suppos'd Motion; Who directed it in the Course of its Motion so, as to move in several contrary Directions; and, Lastly, How these several Particles of Matter came to cease from all farther Motion just at That Period of Time when the World was form'd by it. These certainly were the Effects of Choice, not of Accident; and were the Directions of some Agent endu'd with Wisdom and Understanding, which mere Matter is not.

Not to add, That if this World were fram'd by blind and uncertain Chance, Why is it thus regular and constant now? Why doth not the same Chance still preside; and either alter, or deface the present Constitution of the World? The Absurdities therefore which naturally flow from all the Schemes which have been advanc'd against God's Creating, are no small Confirmation of the Truth of his Creation.

But Fourthly, The Existence of an Almighty and All-wise God is clearly seen, not only in the Original and Creation of the World, but also in his Wise Disposition and Government of it. How comes it to pass,

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(unless directed by the Hand of God,) that Things inanimate and void of Design, are yet subservient to the wisest Designs? How doth it happen, that Creatures which are void of Choice, do yet, by a natural Instinct, pursue such Things, as are most proper and beneficial to them?

In natural Actions even we ourselves use no Deliberation: We do not take Counsel Whether our Pulse shall beat, Whether the Blood shall be distributed for Nourishment: Nor doth the pregnant Mother take Care How the Infant shall be sustain'd in her Womb. And yet all this is perform'd in properer ways, and with greater Evidences of Reason and Wisdom, than what we ourselves could have invented.

Look round upon the external World, and we shall discover the same evident Tokens of a wise God. The continual Successions of Seasons proper for our Life; The wise Position of the Earth we inhabit with respect to the heavenly Bodies; The several Kinds of its Motions, annual and diurnal; The great Quantity, with which it abounds, of all Things necessary for Food, Physick, Building; The admirable Structure and Contrivance in the Parts of all Sorts of Animals; These, and a thousand others of the like Nature, which are daily before our Eyes, give us
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the greatest Assurance, that there is a God over-ruling and directing the Affairs of this World.

These Traces of infinite Wisdom and Power, do as clearly discover that there is a God, as the mathematical *Diagrams*, which he found on the Shore, did discover to the ship-wreck'd Philosopher, that the Country, on which he was thrown, was inhabited.

A Fifth Argument for The Being of a God, is that taken from the working of Miracles. To suspend or alter the stated Laws of Nature, is evidently beyond the Power of any Creature; And therefore, whenever Nature hath been put out of Course; whenever her Laws have been broken; and whenever a miraculous Effect hath been produc'd, it follows, that this must have been done by some Power superior to Nature; by some Being, that can controul her Operations; by some Hand, that commands and holds the Reins of the World; and That can be none other than the Being we call God. Miracles therefore, as often as they are wrought, are apparent Tokens of God's Hand; and thence are a Proof of his Being.

And that such Miracles have been wrought, is attested not only by *Divine* Writers, (whose Authority is indeed of no Weight in the present Dispute,) but also by such *Heathen* Authors,

thors, to whose Authority no Exceptions can be made. Witness the miraculous Eclipse of the Sun at the Time of our Saviour's Passion, recorded in the History of *Phlegon*, sometime Servant to the Emperor *Trajan*.

It is true indeed, that we are not acquainted with all the Laws of Nature; We cannot say that we know the full Force, and Power of all natural Agents; and therefore, in some Cases, we may be much mistaken in our Conjectures, and take things to be Miracles, which are in fact none other than the proper Effects of such Causes and Agents. This is indeed true.

But then, tho' we are not acquainted with the full Force and Power of all natural Agents, yet with some of them we are: We know, for Instance, that it is the Nature of Fire to burn; and that to divide, and rise up on an Heap, is contrary to the Nature of Water: When therefore, it hath been experienc'd, that Three Men have pass'd thro' a fiery Furnace, untouch'd and unsing'd; and that the Waters of the Sea have rais'd themselves on an Heap, and given dry Passage to an Army of Men, then we are certain, that a Miracle was wrought, contrary to the known Laws of Nature, and in which it was impossible for Men to mistake. And if these were truly and properly Miracles, They demonstrate

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strate the Being of a God; because none but God can be the Author of Miracles.

Of the same Nature with this is the Argument drawn from *Prophecies*. It is certain, that human Knowledge doth not extend to future Contingencies; and that, to determine the manner in which these, (especially when distant,) shall come to pass, argues something superior to what may be found in finite and limited Knowledge. If therefore Prophecies have ever been given, and the Events punctually answer'd the Predictions, it must follow, that there is a God over-ruling and disposing the Affairs of the World; *Prophecies* being infallible Tokens of the Divinity of their Author.

Lastly, I might to this Purpose, (would the Time permit,) insist on several other Arguments, which have been frequently urg'd in Proof of a God. Such is that taken from the Idea of God; that, because we frame in our Minds the Notion of infinite Perfection, therefore there must be such a Being as corresponds to this Idea: or, that infinite Perfection being necessary to constitute a God, *Existence* must necessarily belong to him; because *Existence* is a Perfection.

Such is also that Proof taken from our inward Conscience; in which faithful Remembrancer is lodg'd a tacit Acknowledgment

of his Being, and which hath not fail'd to break forth and manifest itself, even in those Persons who have most warmly oppos'd it, upon their Apprehensions of Danger, and their Fears of some impending Calamity.

Such, Lastly, is that Argument drawn (to prove the Novelty of the World,) from the late Institution of Government; from the gradual Improvements in Arts and Sciences; from the Progress of Commerce and peopling the Earth; and from our having no Records or History of Ages farther back than the Times of the Creation, according to *Moses's* Account of it.

All these are moral Arguments that the World was not from Eternity, but in Time created by God: For had it been otherwise, without Doubt we should have still remaining some Records of those past Ages; Arts and Sciences would, thro' so long a Series of Time, have been much more improv'd; The Earth would have been, in every Place, fill'd with Inhabitants; And the Commerce between the several Nations of it have been more universally establish'd. These Things are clear Proofs that the World had a Beginning; and consequently, they demonstrate a Divine Agent, that gave it a Beginning.

Having thus set before you the several Evidences we have of the Being of a God,

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I come now, in the Third and Last Place, to make some Reflexions and Inferences from what hath been said, and so conclude.

And, First, we may observe what a gross Absurdity That Man is guilty of, who asserts, or undertakes to prove, that there is no such Being as a God. For, before he can be qualified to assure himself or others, that there is no such Being, he must first know all the Beings that are in the World; because, if his Knowledge does not extend to every Thing that is in Being, there may be a God for ought he can tell, since his Knowledge doth not extend to all Things that are. The Denyer of a God must have such a perfect Knowledge, as to include and comprehend all the Beings that are; for otherwise, there may still be a God, and he not know it.

But now, is it not the greatest Absurdity and Folly for any Man to pretend, that he knows all the Beings that are in the World? Would any Man, in his Senses, lay Claim to so extensive a Knowledge, as to say positively there is no such Being? — If there is, and if he would undertake to prove to others this Point, he will find himself oblig'd to make out plainly, That it is impossible there should be any such Being; or, that the Supposal of such a Being implies a Contradiction. This is the only Way of evincing, (what the Pa-

trons of *Atheism* must evince,) an universal Negative. And when this shall be made appear, He will indeed have good Reason to deny his Being.

Farther, The Folly and Unreasonableness of *Atheism* is from hence evident; that they who deny the Being of a God, run themselves upon the same Difficulties which they endeavour to avoid: And sure there cannot be a greater Weakness, than to reject an Opinion, supported by so strong Reasons, so consonant to our own Understandings, and so universally embrac'd by the wisest Nations, and yet to take up another, which is attended with the same or greater Difficulties.

Thus, they who deny a God, because (as they say,) they cannot allow of any infinite Being, do yet in their Scheme allow an infinite Space, in which the Matter mov'd when the World was form'd. And, they who disbelieve a God, as not conceiving how a Being can be Eternal, do yet very readily confess that Something must be Eternal; and therefore place that Perfection in this World which we inhabit.

Is it not therefore as easy to allow God to be Infinite, as mere void Space? And is it not much more conformable to Reason, to acknowledge God to be Eternal, than to affirm this World to be so? Do not these Perfections

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fections better become a Being which is purely Spiritual, than they do either Space or Matter? — If Difficulties cannot be avoided between two contrary Opinions, it is apparently most prudent to adhere to that Opinion, which is attended with the least.

Farther, Upon the same Principles, and for the same Reasons, on which some Men call in Question the Being of a God, they must also disbelieve some other Things, which they yet acknowledge to be true. Thus, they tell us, that there can be no such Thing as a spiritual Substance, void of all Matter; and therefore, there can be no such God, as is a pure Spirit. But, let them only reflect seriously on themselves, and their own Nature; they cannot but be sensible, that They themselves have a Power of thinking, of recollecting Things past, and of reasoning upon Things present: They cannot also but be sensible, that these Perfections could never flow from mere Matter; because Matter, of itself, is unactive: They must therefore allow, that there is even in themselves some spiritual Substance, which we usually call the Soul; because these several Properties could never flow from mere Matter: And, if they are thus conscious of some spiritual Substance within themselves, Nothing can be more unreasonable,

reasonable, than to disbelieve a God, because He is said to be a Spirit.

I cannot but take Notice of one Thing more, which apparently shews the Folly of *Atheism*: And that is, Supposing it to be a doubtful Case, Whether there be a God, or not; and allowing that the Arguments brought against the Being of a God, have as much Force as those that are brought to support it: In this uncertain Case, where the Evidences on both Sides are suppos'd to be equal, What would a wise and prudent Man chuse; and on which Side would he determine himself? Why, on that certainly where there is the least Danger; and that is plainly on our Side.

For, if there be no God, then all that I shall suffer, (if it may be call'd a Suffering,) is, that by this erroneous Belief, I have been led into the Practice of Religion and Virtue: But, if there should, after all, be a God, the Danger is evidently greater on the Side of Infidelity; because the *Atheist* will be eternally ruin'd for not believing it.

I have now, I hope, sufficiently shewn the Being of a God; and the Unreasonableness, Folly and Danger of the contrary Belief: But, that this Discourse may not be wholly speculative, or seem in no Measure to influence our Lives and Actions, give me Leave
briefly

briefly to lay before You a few practical Inferences from it; and to shew You, what Effect the Belief of a God ought to have on our Lives and Manners.

And, First, If there be a God, let us not live as tho' there were none. Let us not, whilst we abhor Speculative Atheism, run in to that which is Practical. Let not our Actions be a Contradiction to our Faith; and, Let us not name the Name of God with our Mouth, whilst our Heart is estrang'd and far from him. Let us not, upon any Occasion, blaspheme that sacred Name in Oaths and Curses, in rash Vows and Promises, in Prophaneness and lewd Talking. The distinguishing Name of God [*Jehovah*] was by the *Jews* always esteem'd so sacred, that they thought it a Piece of Prophaneness to pronounce it, even upon the most solemn and sacred Occasions. How will those *Jews* rise up in the Judgment against this our Generation, and condemn it, as being less guilty of such habitual and open Blasphemies! Let us not take that sacred Name in vain, when we know that those who do so shall not be held guiltless.

Secondly, and to have done; If there be a God, endow'd with Infinite Perfections, let us have Recourse to these his Perfections for the Relief of all our Wants. Let us love, honour and adore him with the purest Worship;

ship; and with that especially, (which he prefers to all external Adoration,) a clean Heart, and a purified Mind. Let our Behaviour before him be such, as is fit for his Presence; Our Thoughts of him be suitable to his Greatness; and our Actions such, as may bear the Test of his Justice.



who do so shall not be held guiltless. Secondly, and to have done; If there be a God, endow'd with Infinite Perfections, let us have Recourse to these his Perfections for the Relief of all our Wants. Let us love him with the purest Love

SERMON II.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

HAVING propos'd from these Words to discuss and treat of the several Doctrines of us Christians concerning the Holy Scriptures; both in an argumentative Method against all their Enemies and Opposers, of what Denomination soever; and also in a practical Way, as they give Rise to many Duties incumbent on us to discharge; I did, (in Pursuance of this Design,) in the Last Discourse, establish that first Principle on which this whole Subject is grounded, and on which all our future Reasonings on it depend, as necessary Deductions and infallible Consequences, [The Being of a God.]

The Enemies and Opposers of Scripture, as they are of different Interests, and pursue different Ends, so they have taken different Methods to obtain their Ends.

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It's principal and capital Adversaries, the *Atheists*, have taken away all Possibility of it's Divine Authority, by denying that there is any such Being from whom we derive it's Original.

It's next Enemies, the *Deists*, tho' they acknowledge the Existence of Him we suppose it's Author, yet deny that That Being hath made any particular Revelation of his Will; and therefore, that those Books which pretend it, are a Fraud and Imposture.

And, Lastly, even among Christians, (who condemn both the before-mention'd Tenets,) there are not wanting those who object to the Perfection of this Revelation; and teach many other Doctrines derogatory and detracting from its Honour and Dignity.

Towards the refuting these several Tenets, the Argument, I propose to urge, will consist indeed of several Steps and Degrees; but these closely connected, inseparably united, and mutually dependent on each other.

In Confutation of the First Error, I have already evinc'd, that there is a God; and of Consequence, that such a Revelation of his Will is possible.

In Confutation of the Second Error, (that of the *Deist*,) it must be the Business of the present Discourse to shew, that from the Allowance of a God, and from the necessary

Attri-

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Attributes and Perfections of his Nature, a Revelation of his Will is become incumbent on him. This therefore shall be the First Point I am to evince at present.

I shall then shew, Secondly, That as it was thus necessary on the Part of God to make a Revelation, so was it likewise, that the Revelation, thus made, should be committed to Writing; and be transmitted to succeeding Ages in that Method, which alone is sufficient to preserve it entire and incorrupted.

After which I shall, in the Last Place, apply what shall have been said on these two Propositions, to those Bodies of Men, who deny and disown them; and sum up the whole in some useful Inferences for our own Practice.

First then, I am to evince, That from the Acknowledgment of a God, and from the Consideration of the Attributes and Perfections of his Nature, it was incumbent on him to make a Revelation of his Will to Man.

I need not, in this Place, enter on a metaphysical Proof, that The Being whom we call God, is a Being endow'd with all possible Perfections; because, this is acknowledg'd and confess'd by all those, who allow his Existence.

The *Deist*, as well as the *Christian*, attributes all Perfections to God; and those too
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in the same infinite Extent. They are sensible, as well as we, that God hath no Limits of Perfection; and that That Being, from whom all Degrees of it are deriv'd, must itself possess them in the utmost Latitude.

From this allow'd Topick therefore, [that God is a Being of all Infinite Perfections,] we form our Argument for the Necessity of a Revelation, by appealing to some of these his Perfections, which must influence and direct a Revelation; Such are, his Holiness, his Goodness, his Mercy and his Wisdom. All these conspire to incite God to reveal himself to Men, as will more fully appear if we consider them severally.

By the essential Holiness of God, we understand not only a total Exemption from, and Incapacity of Sin and Impurity in himself; but also a fix'd Abhorrence and Detestation of it in his Creatures; not only a spotless Innocence, and Impossibility of Corruption in the Divine Nature, but also an immoveable Aversion and Hatred to it in others. A Principle this, of not only not transgressing in his own Person, but also of using all rational Methods of Precaution for the preventing it in the Works of his Hands.

From this Attribute we may justly infer, that God would not entirely overlook Man, thro' the Depravity of his corrupted Nature

and

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and the Snares of Evil Spirits fallen into that Sin, which is so disagreeable and odious to him.

Of himself Man is confessedly unequal to his Duty: Our best Attempts are impotent: We fall an easy Prey to Satan: His Victory is cheap, because our Resistance is feeble. The Temptations to Sin are suited to our Appetites: Her Paths are seemingly pleasant: Our Understandings easily misled and impos'd on; and our own Hearts treacherous to our Interests. Sin being for these Reasons almost unavoidable by us, the Aversion which God bears to it, call'd loudly on him to manifest his Will for our avoiding it; and to use all the Means, which were reconcileable with our Liberty of acting, to prevent our offending.

Where were the Holiness of God, if Mankind were left entirely destitute to sink under a Corruption of Manners? And how should we be induc'd to believe him that fond Lover of Virtue, that determin'd Enemy to Impiety, should he have done Nothing to rescue us from the Dominion of Sin? No; His Holiness is concern'd to hinder the Commission of Sin, as far as is consistent with the Freedom of Men's Actions; and therefore to That Holiness do we appeal, as one of those Attributes, which must induce him to manifest his

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Will to Man; and by that Means, either to preserve him in his Uprightness, or to restore him to it.

Farther, The inherent Goodness, or Benevolence of God, is another Attribute of his Nature, from whence we may infer his having made some Revelation of his Will. This Goodness of God is that Principle by which, we conceive, He is ever inclin'd to promote the Good, and add to the Happiness of all his Dependents. But, by what Method is it possible for God better to consult the Happiness of Man, than by imparting to him his Will; by directing him by what Means he may be rightly serv'd; by pointing out the Way to please him; and giving him Rules, whereby to form himself for a blessed Immortality? What greater Honour or Felicity is Human Nature capable of, than to receive the Commands of God from his own Hands; and to converse with him in a Covenant of his own proper making? If God be by Essence Good and Benevolent, in no one Instance whatsoever could he have given us more evident Proof of it, than by imparting to us a Divine Revelation.

Again, From the natural Mercy of God we rationally infer the Concern He had, to make such a Revelation as we contend for. By his Mercy The Almighty is ever prompted

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✓ *Sermon the Second.*

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to succour the weak; to administer Relief to the indigent; to inform the ignorant; and to recall the Wanderer. How then could this glorious Attribute be display'd in greater Lustre, than by making Man the Subject of it; Man, blinded in his Understanding, deprav'd in his Will, estrang'd from God in his Heart, subjected to Passions, and enslav'd to vile Affections? The putting an End to these Disorders by a Divine Revelation, was a Matter worthy the Creator's Mercy. The natural Love and Tenderness of a general Father, must necessarily lead him to take some Course for our Recovery; to vindicate his own Honour; to rescue us from the Snares of Sin; and to exert himself for the Preservation of his Creatures.

To mention but one Attribute more, The Wisdom of God was also concern'd to make a Revelation of his Will; That Wisdom by which God always chuses the best and most proper Ends; and pursues those Ends by the fittest and most suitable Means. But what End can be more worthy of God's Wisdom, than the greatest Good that Man can attain to, the Ease and Comfort of this Life, and the eternal Happiness of the next? Nothing certainly can be of greater Consequence than this; and therefore no End more suitable to that consummate and infinite Wisdom,

which we acknowledge in the Divine Being.

And as this End is great and worthy, so the Means, I am now insisting on, the Revelation of God's Will, is equally fitting and suitable. As it contains full Instructions, and perfect Rules for Man's Guidance and Direction; — as it proposes the best Example, and enforces an Imitation of it by the strongest Motives; so it leads him in the directest and surest Way to the End design'd. No better Means could be devis'd, whereby Man might be brought to answer the great End of his Creation in serving and obeying God, than by declaring to him what God expects; by awak'ning his Attention; by allarming his Fears; and giving Life, and Briskness to his Hopes.

From this short View we find, that the principal Attributes of God do all conspire to evince the Necessity of a Divine Revelation. His Holiness, His Goodness, His Mercy, and His Wisdom were all deeply interested to impart such a Blessing: And therefore we may conclude from hence, with great Assurance, either that such a Revelation hath been given us; or, at least, that such will be given us in some future Time. This Conclusion seems to flow directly from these known Attributes of God.

But farther; It is not only from the Attributes

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tributes of God that we deduce the Necessity of a Divine Revelation, but we may also most rationally infer it from the Nature of Man; --- it's Infirmary and Imperfection; and the Incompetency of any other Method to preserve him in his Duty, and to secure him from the-grossest Mistakes in Religion and Worship.

Human Nature, in it's best Estate, would have been no Security against Corruption in Worship: In it's worst, (in which we now enjoy it,) it is more likely to carry us into it.

To make this more obvious, let us view the Behaviour of Men when there was not that great Degeneracy we now complain of, and before the Torrent of Corruption had made so general a Havock; --- I mean, in the first and Infant Ages of the World.

Religion was then contain'd within narrow Bounds, and compriz'd in a few Precepts. But few Things were then to be believ'd concerning God, (as that He was a Spiritual Being, — that He created all Things, — that He alone was to be worship'd and serv'd, and the like.) These were the principal Dictates of Natural Religion; and in which, one might think, Men could not easily have deviated from their Duty.

They had also the Advantage of very long Lives; They saw their Families spread large-

ly; and, by that means, had the Credit and Authority of Parents over very considerable Bodies of Men. Two Persons only, (i.e. *Methuselah* and *Sem*;) might have convey'd Religion entire and uncorrupted from *Adam* down to *Abraham*: The former liv'd above three hundred Years while *Adam* was yet alive, and almost an hundred in the Life of *Sem*; and *Sem* above an hundred in the Life of *Abraham*. Here was a vast Period of Time fill'd up with the Lives of two or three Persons: And yet, even in this Series of Time, we find Religion was so grossly corrupted, as to degenerate into down-right Idolatry; insomuch that, (according to the Scripture Accounts,) God thought fit to correct it by an immediate Revelation to *Abraham*; and by the Institution of Circumcision, to set a distinguishing Mark upon his peculiar People; thereby discriminating and separating them from a polluted World.

In this sad Instance we have a convincing Proof of the Deficiency of *Natural Religion*, and how necessary it is we should be guided and assisted by a Divine Revelation. And can we imagine that a God of unbounded Love to his Creatures would suffer them thus to lie enslav'd to Superstition and Idolatry? Is it probable that He should apply no Remedy to this Evil? Can it be thought He would
entirely

entirely disregard a World given up to the Bondage of Sin and Wickedness? Is it not, on the contrary, much more probable, that a Jealousy of his own Honour, thus given to Idols, would prompt him to bring Man back to his Duty, by revealing this Duty to him?

Again; a Divine Revelation will be found to be necessary, if we consider the Corruption and Depravity of Man's Nature; the Prone-ness to Evil and Aversion to Good, which we experience in ourselves.

How we came by this Corruption of Nature, it is not at present our Business to enquire: It is sufficient for our Purpose, that it is in Fact so corrupted; and that the best and wisest Men, even among the Heathens, have, in all Ages, loudly confess'd and lamented it. Those therefore who deny a Divine Revelation, will find themselves oblig'd to acknowledge the Corruption of Man's Nature; And if that be once granted, the Necessity of a Revelation will easily appear.

For, how can it be expected that, in such a Case, Men should be dispos'd either to learn their Duty, or to practice it, whilst their very Condition supposes the direct contrary? If not, then it is clear, something farther is needful, which arises not from within a Man's own self, and which cannot be supply'd but

by some extraordinary Manifestation of The Divine Will: Nor can we presume God would leave the World under this deprav'd Condition, (however contracted,) without some Provision for it's Rescue by a new and more compleat Institution.

Lastly; a Revelation of the Divine Will from thence-forward became more necessary, when Man was expos'd to the Assaults of evil Spirits; to the Temptations of our grand Enemy the Devil; and to the Stratagems he uses to accomplish our Destruction.

I shall not now spend Time in the Proof that there are such Evil Spirits; because the Effects of them are so visible in the Heathen World, as to be acknowledg'd by their best Writers. The Superstition and Idolatry; the inhuman and bloody Sacrifices; the unnatural and barbarous Murthers; and particularly, that of exposing their new-born Infants, which were both allow'd by their Laws, and commonly practis'd even among the most polite Heathen Nations, *Greece and Rome*, were questionless begun at the Instigation of these wicked Spirits. *The making Children to pass thro' the Fire to Moloch; — The offering their Sons and Daughters unto Devils*, could never be acted in Conformity to the Divine Will, but must necessarily be owing to the Influence of the Devil. The false Oracles he deliver'd

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deliver'd in Imitation of those which The true God gave out; The Prodigies he pretended to shew; The future Events he feign'd himself to disclose, are but too apparent Evidences of the Existence of such malicious Spirits, as are ever contriving the Mischief and Ruin of Man.

If all this be true, (as doubtless it is,) then The Attributes of God seem to be concern'd in restraining this Dominion of Satan; in making Men return to the Worship of The True God; in resuming the Divine Honour, alienated to false Gods; and in pointing out to mislead, mistaken Mankind, the only perfect Worship, the only Way to Happiness, by a new Manifestation, and a clearer Revelation of The Divine Pleasure, than the bare Light of Reason can furnish us with.

To these Arguments for the Necessity of a Divine Revelation on the part of Man, may be added these which follow;

1. Man alone could not form a perfect System of Morality. The Philosophers came vastly short of it: and Christianity hath oblig'd us to some Virtues, in a manner unheard of before; such as *Loving our Enemies*, and Governing our very Thoughts, to which no human Laws can possibly extend.

2. Man alone could never find out in what manner to worship God acceptably; Hence, whilst

whilst left to himself, he fell into the grossest Idolatry, and added to it Human Sacrifices.

3. Man alone could not discover how to atone for his Sins, and reconcile himself to God. Mere Repentance and forsaking them, could not do this: For, to live holily was his Duty always; and therefore, could not make an Attonement for his Transgressions. There was a Necessity of such a Mediator, as could be discover'd to us no otherwise than by an extraordinary Revelation.

Hitherto I have evinc'd my First Proposition, namely, That from the Consideration of the Attributes of God, (to which I have added the forlorn Condition of Man,) it became incumbent on Him to make a Revelation of his Will to us. That such a Revelation is contain'd in the Books of the Old and New Testaments, I shall hereafter evince at large by Proofs incontestable. In the mean Time, I proceed to

The Second Proposition I am now to speak to; namely, That as it was thus necessary to make a Revelation, so was it likewise, that such a Revelation should be committed to Writing; and be transmitted to succeeding Ages by that Method, which only could be sufficient to preserve it entire and uncorrupted.

That the Committing to Writing such a
Reve-

Revelation as God should make, would be the most effectual Way to answer it's Ends, by securing it from Corruption, is a Proposition so evident to common Understanding, that it might justly seem frivolous and impertinent to spend Time in it's Proof, were it not made necessary to us by the direct Opposition of the Romish Church.

Her Writers, that they may the better support her Doctrine concerning Tradition, (upon which indeed almost all her Grandeur and Usurpation is establish'd, and which therefore, they are deeply concern'd to support,) do assert, that there was no Necessity of a written Revelation; — that Tradition may as safely be rely'd on as Scripture; — Nay, to that Heighth have some of them carry'd this Matter, as to affirm, that it would have been better for the Church of God to have had no written Rule at all *.

This Assertion seeming to charge the Scripture with Imperfection, as needing the Assistance of Tradition; and withal, reflecting on the Wisdom of God, in chusing this Method of conveying his Will to Man, by committing it to Writing; it is become expedient to obviate this Tenet, by producing a few Reasons, why it might be judg'd most proper,

* See Cardinal *Hofius* and others apud *Turretin. Theol. Elenct. V. 1. p. 63.*

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that this Divine Revelation should be consign'd to Writing.

Now the Expediency of this will appear, if we reflect, how incompetent a Method a bare oral Tradition would have been found, to have transmitted to us whole, and uncorrupted, so large and extensive a Dispensation, as is that, first of the *Jewish*, and then of the *Christian* Religion.

What Man's Memory could have been sufficient to have carried in it, and that at all Times, and without Variation, the several Circumstances of Fact, not only relating to *Moses*, but to our Saviour also, in his Birth, Life, and manner of Death? — The excellent Discourses He made; — The astonishing Miracles He wrought; — The several Virtues He propos'd to our Imitation; and the necessary Truths He requir'd us to believe? Common Observation can inform us, that the retaining all this would have been a Burthen too large for human Memory, — too much to have been preserv'd by any other Means than by being committed to Writing.

In Things of daily Occurrence, — in Matters of Fact attended with few Circumstances, we see what different Representations are made of the same Thing. Scarce two Men can be found to relate a Matter with exactly the same Circumstances; nay, scarcely can
a single

a single Man repeat, at distinct Times, a Fact, with which he is well acquainted, without some little Disagreement and Variation from himself. If so, it is easy to conceive, how strangely misrepresented the Scripture Historys would have been to us of these later Ages, so distant from the Time in which the Facts therein related happen'd, and so remote from the Place whereon they were acted.

And these are no vain Surmises, or groundless Conjectures, since the History and Experience of all Ages confirm this Truth, by largely setting before us the great Additions and Superstructures, that have been made on Truth, either when Men have not been furnish'd with a written Rule, or have too easily admitted human Traditions.

Thus, (as I have observ'd on the former Head,) in the infant Ages of the World, and before the Giving of *Moses's* Law, tho' Religion was contain'd in narrow Bounds, and compriz'd in a few Precepts; and tho' it had a singular Advantage towards the being preserv'd entire, by the great Length of the Lives of the first Patriarchs; yet we find, that in a Period of Time, no longer than the Lives of three Men, Religion became so grossly corrupted, as to degenerate into Idolatry.

After the Giving of the Law by *Moses*, when one would have thought, that it's being
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in a manner confin'd to so narrow a Country as *Judea*; — the Honour of having God's particular Presence among the *Jews*; — the Happiness of having a continu'd Succession of Prophets, *by whom* (as the Author to the *Hebrews* observes,) *God spake to our Fathers at sundry Times, and in divers manners*; — the peculiar Prerogative of consulting God upon any Emergency, and receiving Answers from several Kinds of Oracles, in which He was pleas'd to deliver himself to them; (such were, by the *Urim* and *Thummim* communicated by the High Priest; by audible Voices from Heaven; by Visions and Dreams of pious and inspir'd Persons; by Prophecies and Inspirations; and very frequently, by Appearances of Angels;) when, I say, one would have thought that these, and many other signal Advantages should have been as so many Fences and Securities against the least Corruption; yet, we find, that as soon as the *Jews* began to receive oral Traditions with Respect and Reverence; — as soon as they began blindly to admit the Precepts of their Elders, the Doctrines of Men, the Comments of their Doctors, and paid a like Deference to the Institutions of *Moses*, and of those who succeeded and *sat in his Chair*; they quickly lost the Substance of their Religion; they plac'd it chiefly in external Observances, a

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Multitude of Washings and such like ritual Performances; and dropt the Life and Substance of it in nice Observations of mere Outside and Ceremony: vainly imagining, that an exact Obedience in the Externals of Religion, would compensate and make Amends for the Neglect of the *weightier Duties of the Law, Justice and Judgment*: Insomuch that our Saviour roundly told them, that *they had made the Law of God of none Effect by their Traditions*.

Thus mischievous and detrimental to the State of Religion have Traditions been in the *Jewish* Dispensation; and so fatal the Consequences, when Men have either not been guided by a sufficient written Rule, or have too implicitly swerv'd from it to the Traditions of Men, and receiv'd and follow'd that false Light.

Nor hath this been the unhappy Fate of the *Jewish* Church only; but we find a Parallel to it even in the *Christian*.

The first Ages of Christianity preserv'd themselves entire and uncorrupt, by a firm Perswasion of, and immoveable Adherence to this Tenet, That the Scriptures are a sufficient Rule; — That all the Necessaries to Salvation are therein reveal'd and contain'd; — and, that there is no one Point either of Faith or Manners, that is built and establish'd solely on Tradition.

Yet,

Yet, when in the following, and less pure Ages, Traditions were (for secular Ends and Interests chiefly,) pretended and set up, and an Obedience to them inculcated, taught and requir'd; Superstition succeeded to Primitive Religion; Traditions, by degrees, supplanted the Scriptures; and the simple, and easy Doctrines of Christianity were exchange'd for disputable Points, Doctrines of endless Perplexity; and these requir'd to be receiv'd and believ'd, as of equal Authority with the most clearly reveal'd ones, and as necessary, as They, to the Salvation of Souls.

Hence, in that very Church, (against which this Head of Discourse is levell'd,) thro' deserting the written Rule of God's Word, and relying on pretended Traditions, a great Variety of Additions have been made to our Religion, both in fundamental Doctrines, and in the Worship and Discipline of the Church.

Hence, the Addition of five imaginary Sacraments; Prayers in an unknown Tongue; The Doctrine of Intention; The propitiatory Sacrifice in the Eucharist; and, (not to name any more,) hence, that Creed, compos'd by Pope *Pius* the IV, (and whose Confession is exacted from every Member of that Communion,) consisting of Twelve Articles, each of which is as manifestly false, as the twelve
Articles

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Articles of the *Apostles Creed*, (in whose Imitation it is fram'd,) are evidently true.

Thus, intolerable Corruptions being the inevitable Consequence of relying on Traditions, it became absolutely necessary, that the Truths of the Christian Religion, which were to be diffus'd to the extreamest Parts of the Earth, and the only standing Revelation *as long as the Sun and Moon endure*, should be secur'd and fenc'd against any Innovations, by the only Method capable of securing them, namely, the committing them to Writing.

But, tho' the Preservation of Religion entire and uncorrupt might be the chief Reason that God committed this Revelation to Writing, yet perhaps it was not the only one, many others offering themselves to our Consideration; of which I shall name but one.

It could not otherwise happen, but that, thro' the Unwariness and Inadvertency of some; the contentious Disposition of others, the Ambition, in a third Sort of Men, of being thought to see farther, and make happier Discoveries in Religion than their Predecessors had done; and, more especally, thro' the restless Application of the grand Enemy of Mankind to disturb the Peace and Repose of the Christian Church; For all these Reasons, I say, it could not otherwise happen, but that Diversities of Opinions would arise;

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Dissentions and Divisions be hatch'd and fomented; and the greater Part of the Church be amaz'd and at a Loss, unable to distinguish and judge among which Sect of Men the Truth was to be found; No Party of them all being without some Reasons, (seemingly probable at least) whereon to ground and justify their Sentiments.

In this Condition of Affairs it becomes necessary, that there should be some fix'd and certain Standard, by which the several Pretences might be examin'd; some unalterable Rule and Test, by which the Soundness of Doctrines might be judg'd and determin'd.

Such a Rule we affirm the holy Scriptures to be; by their Agreement, or Disagreement with which, Doctrines are to be receiv'd as true and sound, or to be rejected and disapproved as groundless and unwarrantable.

Upon the whole: From these Reasons appears the Necessity, that a Divine Revelation should be transmitted to Posterity in Writing, namely, that Religion might be secur'd against Additions and Diminutions; and that there might not be wanting an infallible Rule, by which the Truth might be discover'd among Diversities of Opinions.

I am now, in the Last Place, to apply what hath been said under these two Propositions, to those Bodies of Men, who deny and disown them;

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them; and to sum up the whole in some useful Inferences for our own Practice.

The former Proposition of this Discourse, [The Necessity of a Divine Revelation in order to our fulfilling the Will of God,] being denied by the whole Tribe of *Deists* of the present Age, who maintain the Sufficiency of our own Faculties to guide us, and assert, that Man hath no Occasion for a Revelation from God to that purpose; we may reflect, how unreasonably these Men argue; — how partially they judge of human Abilities; — and how they build on the Perfection of Man much more than it can bear.

I have, in the Beginning of this Discourse, shewn from the History and Experience of all Ages, from the Creation downwards, into what a Sink of Error and Corruption Mankind hath fallen, where there hath been no Revelation from God to direct them, and where they have had no other Rule than their native Reason.

From these historical Observations it appears, beyond Contradiction, how weak and insufficient the bare natural Powers of Man are, to enable him to perform the Will of his Creator; and consequently, how necessary to such a Performance is a Revelation from God, for his Rule and Direction.

And, is human Nature endow'd with greater

Strength now, than it was heretofore? Is Reason stronger; Are our Judgments more solid; Are our Passions more governable, than those of our Fore-fathers? Are We more sufficient than they? What Additions of Help, — what Accessions of Strength, — what Increase of Disposition towards the Discharge of Duty, hath our Nature receiv'd, which that of our Ancestors had not in common with us? Nothing of this Kind can be claim'd or pretended.

On the contrary, we might, with a greater Appearance of Probability, ask and demand, Whether human Nature be not grown weaker? Whether Length of Time, and habitual sinning, hath not impair'd our Strength? Whether Corruption hath not gain'd Ground of us; And, whether our Minds are not more easily subdu'd to the Bondage of Sin, than those of our Predecessors? This I think no wise improbable: And therefore, instead of denying that Man hath any Need of a Revelation, our *Deist* should rather acknowledge, that the Necessity of it hath grown stronger in every Generation.

The Opposers of our Second Proposition, that is, the Body of the *Romish* Church, (who assert that the Scriptures were written occasionally; and that there was no Necessity that the Revelation they contain should be committed

mitted to Writing,) ought to reflect, how absurd this their Assertion is, and how directly repugnant to common Understanding.

That Man must be lost to Sense, who affirms, that it is safer to take Things upon Report, than from an unalter'd Writing; and that, to convey a Truth to latest Ages to come, it is more adviseable to deliver it by Word of Mouth, than to enter it upon Record, or transmit it in Writing on a Book. It is to affirm, that Words spoken are more easily preserv'd than Words written; — that Sounds are a more certain Conveyance of Things, than Writing is; — and that, to preserve the Substance of what is deliver'd in Speech, it is safer to trust to our Memories, than to consign it to Paper.

This Way of arguing is indeed an Affront to the common Sense of Man; a palpable Imposition upon Reason; and a Contradiction to all Understanding. Do Men make their last Wills by Word of Mouth only? Do they bequeath Estates, settle their Effects, contract Bargains, or indeed make any Compacts of Moment, without a sure Record of them in Writing? Is it not for Safety and Security, and to prevent Mistakes, that these Methods are taken in worldly Affairs? And is there not the same, or greater Reason, that the Divine Truths should be as cautiously guarded?

In a Word; the same Reasons, for which God order'd his former Laws to be written, will for ever be good Reasons on our side against this Tenet of the *Romanists*. *Write this* (said God to Moses, *Exod. 17. 14.*) *for a Memorial in a Book*; And in the 30th of *Isaiah*, v. 8th. *Go, write it before them in a Table, and note it in a Book, that it may be for the Time to come, for ever and ever.*

To sum up the whole, and apply these Propositions in some useful Inferences for our own Practice, is all that now remains to be done.

The Necessity which we have evinc'd of a Divine Revelation, in order to serve God aright; and the utter Insufficiency of Man's natural Powers to enable him to perform the Will of his Creator, may teach us to entertain low and humble Thoughts of ourselves, and our Abilities. *Why should we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think*, when we experimentally find it to be true, that *of ourselves we cannot think any thing as of ourselves*? What Reason hath Man to plume himself on his boasted Perfections, when the utmost of them is incapable of teaching him his Duty? What Room is there for Man to be proud of the Profoundness of his Knowledge, the Extensiveness of his Memory, the Depth of his Reasoning, and the Strength of his Parts, when

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when all this is found to be so very defective in that only Subject, which is truly worthy of us, the Service and Worship of God?

In our Reasonings on material Things indeed, and such as are the Objects of our Senses, our Perfections are serviceable, and our Knowledge such, as may seem to set us but little lower than the Angels. But when we reason on Things Divine, and search into spiritual Things, there we seem to be but little above the Beasts that perish; and are oblig'd to God's Revelation for all our Knowledge. Let us from hence learn to make a just Estimate of our Perfections; and not attribute to ourselves more Sufficiency and Ability, than properly belongs to us.

Lastly, and to have done; For the Revelation of the Divine will in Spirituals, Let us return God, as we are most bounden, all sincere and hearty Thanks. Let us contemplate, and with Gratitude reflect on his infinite Goodness and transcendent Love, that hath thus made Provision for our Weakness and Inabilities. Let us celebrate that Goodness, which hath not only provided for our temporal Welfare, in supplying us, with a liberal Hand, with all Things necessary to our Bodies; but hath also taken Care for our spiritual Wants, sustain'd our Souls, and pointed out the Way to eternal Happiness. Let

us thankfully receive this inestimable Benefit, the Revelation of God's Will; Let us make the proper Use it was intended for; and let us continually promote it's two great Ends, the Glory of God, and the Salvation of our Souls.



SERMON

SERMON III.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

WHen we reflect on the Insufficiency of natural Reason only to teach us our whole Duty; how incompetent a Provision the Perfections of human Nature afford us against Errors in Religion, or Mistakes in Divine Worship; how altogether incapable we are, by our own Powers, of securing ourselves from deviating from our Duty; and how unable our own Faculties are to lead us to serve God as we ought; we shall very soon be sensible what a Necessity there was of a Revelation from God, and of a supernatural Direction to perform his Will.

This therefore being become necessary, it pleas'd The Almighty to make a Revelation of his Will, by the Hands of proper Persons, inspir'd for that purpose by his own Holy Spirit. The Revelation, thus made, it was
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his Pleasure to comprize in two Covenants; each of which carries such evident Proofs and Tokens of it's Divine Original, as fully to satisfy the Enquiries and Judgments of all sober and considerate Persons.

But, the present Age having produc'd some Numbers of Men, who have avowedly maintain'd the contrary Belief; and who have industriously set their Hands to overthrow the Divine Original of the Word of God; who have traduc'd the Scripture as a Fraud, and an Imposture, and have asserted it to be barely an human Composition; it cannot be judg'd improper to be at some Pains in supporting the Truth, and maintaining the Divine Authority of these Writings; by laying before you the Evidences and Proofs, on which this our Belief is founded. And this I am more especially concern'd to do here, because it falls in with, and is a Part of that Scheme which I propos'd to handle from the Words of my Text; *Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal Life.*

I have endeavour'd to prepare the Way to this Point of the Divine Authority of the Scriptures, by evincing the Existence, and Being of a God; and, of Consequence, the Possibility of such a Revelation, as we assert and contend for.

This being dispatch'd, I have attempted to
prove

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prove the Necessity of a Revelation from considering the Attributes and Perfections of God's Nature; — The Infirmary and Imperfection of our own; — and, the Corruption and Depravity which we experience in ourselves.

After which, I have prov'd farther, that as it was thus necessary to make a Revelation, so was it likewise, that such a Revelation should be committed to Writing, and be transmitted to succeeding Ages by that Method, which only could be sufficient to preserve it entire and uncorrupted.

It now remains that I pass on to the Matter before me, namely, To prove, that the Revelation I have been contending for, is contain'd in the Scriptures, as the *Jews* assert for the Old Testament, and the *Christians* for both.

The mutual Connexion, and Dependency between these two Testaments being so visible and apparent, The Help and Assistance, which they borrow from each other, being so great; and they reciprocally attesting, and supporting each other; it would have been sufficient, in this place, to have produc'd those Proofs only, which relate to the New Testament, and to have evinc'd the Divine Authority of that Book alone; because, if that were granted, the Divine Original of the Old Testament would of Consequence be establish'd.

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It is observable, that the New Testament being, for the most part, a Completion of the Old, — consisting chiefly in the fulfilling the Prophecies which the other had deliver'd; and withal frequently appealing to the Old as a Divine Revelation, and expressly giving it this Title, *the Oracles of God*; we have hereby full Proof of the Divine Original of the Old Testament, upon Supposal that the New be itself of such Original. But, because it will be an additional Force to our Argument to confirm the Divine Authority of both these Testaments, I shall therefore, in this Discourse, take the following Method;

First, I shall evince the Divine Original of the Law of *Moses*, and the Revelation made to him.

Secondly, I shall shew the same Authority in the Christian Dispensation.

And Lastly, I shall improve these two Points into some practical Inferences.

In the First Place then, I am to evince the Divine Original of the Law of *Moses*, and the Revelation made to him.

That *Moses* was a Prophet sent from God, he demonstrated by that, which was the highest Proof of it, the working of Miracles. Those which he wrought in the Presence of *Pharaoh*, and the Kingdom of *Egypt*, were such as their Magicians could not rival or stand before. His

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conducting afterwards a Body of Six Hundred Thousand Men thro' the Red Sea, (which retir'd, and stood on an Heap to give them dry Passage, but return'd with an irresistible Current to overwhelm their Pursuers;) — and after that, His leading them, for the Space of forty Years, thro' a desert Wilderness, (where they were sustain'd by Bread from Heaven,) — was an Action, in it's whole Progress, and in all it's Circumstances, truly miraculous. The Victories, which were gain'd over their Enemies, in a very extraordinary manner, are no less Evidences of the Hand of God, and that it was the true *Jehovah* who fought their Battles. In short, a continu'd Series of Miracles attended that People in this whole Affair; and to enumerate the particulars, would be to transcribe the *Pentateuch*.

But here it may be objected, that for the Truth of these Miracles we have no certain Foundation. They are recorded only in those Books, which *Moses* himself is suppos'd to have written: And, as they rely on his own Testimony only, so we cannot be assur'd, but that the Miracles themselves, as well as the Books which contain them, may be a Forgery.

To this it may be answer'd, That these Books of *Moses*, in which the Relation of these Miracles is contain'd, were written by himself, and that too, very soon after their being wrought.

wrought. Upon this Account therefore it was altogether impossible for him to forge these Reports; or to pass them on the World, had they not been truly perform'd; there being, at that Time, so many living Witnesses, who could have prov'd the Falshood.

Is it possible that such a Story can gain Credit, as that, for Instance, Six Hundred Thousand Men did yesterday cross an Arm of the Sea dry-shod, and not be contradicted by all those who must know that no such Thing hath happen'd? It is not indeed impossible, but that the Relation of a Matter of Fact, reported to have happen'd many Generations back, or some Hundreds of Years since, may gain Admission, and come to be believ'd: But it cannot be so with Facts, which are said to be done at the present Time, if there be no manner of Foundation for them; because Numbers must be Witnesses to the contrary, and can convict them of Falshood.

Nor can it be conceiv'd that the *Jews* themselves should join to support the Credit of these Miracles, or submit themselves to *Moses*, (as that Nation did,) were they not convinc'd of his acting by a Divine Commission; seeing that Yoke which he put upon their Necks, and that Law to which he bound them, was, in so many respects, uneasy, grievous, and hard to be born. Nothing but the Truth of these

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these Miracles, and the Evidence thence arising to the Divine Original of *Moses's* Law, could have prevail'd on the *Jewish* Nation to acknowledge the Truth of the former, or to become Profelytes and Disciples to the latter.

Beside this Circumstance, which confirms the Truth of *Moses's* Miracles, (and, of consequence, the Divinity of that Revelation he deliver'd,) we have the utmost Assurance of his Integrity that can be desir'd. *Porphyr* himself, (the greatest and ablest Enemy which God's Religion ever had,) gives *Moses* the Character of a faithful and credible Writer. *Trogus Pompeius*, (another Heathen,) gives Testimony to his Wisdom and Honesty; and *Arrianus* acquaints us with his being General against the *Ethiopians* in a ten years War*. These Attestations of *Moses's* Fidelity must be allow'd to carry a greater Weight, as coming from avow'd and profess'd Adversaries to his Religion. And, that we do not meet with fuller Accounts of him, and more to his Advantage, among Heathen Writers, *Josephus* very justly attributes to that Hatred which all the Gentile World bore to the Nation of the *Jews*, and which, he truly supposes, induc'd

* See *Turretin*, Vol. I. pag. 74. Dr *Fenkin's* Reason. of Christianity, Vol. I. p. 131. Dr *Fiddes's* Body of Divinity, Vol. I. p. 189. in the Note.

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their Historians to be partially silent of him, and his great Actions.

But, we need not have Recourse to the Testimony of Heathens for the Integrity and Credibility of *Moses's* Writings. There are Evidences sufficient remaining in his own Writings to prove him a faithful Writer, and above all Temptation to Forgery and Imposture.

He all along describes the *Jews* as a stiff-necked, and hard-hearted Generation; as a crooked, and perverse People; and plainly tells them, that God did not chuse them to himself for any good Quality observable in them, but merely for the sake of *Abraham*, and their Fathers. Of *Levi*, the Head and Father of his own Tribe, (of whose Honour, upon that Account, it might be presum'd he would be very tender,) he hath related a most barbarous, and unjustifiable Action, in revenging on the *Sechemites* the Rape of his Sister *Dinah*. Nor hath he been any thing less particular in exposing his own Failings and Weaknesses, — his Distrust of his own Mission, — his killing an *Egyptian*, — and the other Parts of his Life, which seem to want Excuse.

That he was free from any sinister, and worldly Views, — that he was not over-rul'd by Covetousness, Ambition, or Love of Empire, will appear from hence, that when he had

had the whole Power of that Nation in his Hands, and might have establish'd the Government in his own Family, he made no Provision for that, — gave no greater Division of Land to his own Posterity than to the rest of the People; but order'd Matters so, that in the next Generation, his Family was upon the same Level with the rest of their Tribe. These are evident Tokens of the Impartiality, and Integrity of *Moses*; and, of Consequence, confirm the Truth of all that he relates.

But, secondly, Another incontestable Evidence that *Moses's* Revelation came from God, is, that as it contain'd some Prophecies of what was in future Time to be accomplish'd, so these Predictions were accordingly fulfill'd: And, there cannot be a more sure Evidence of God's having given a Revelation, than it's having been accompany'd with Prophecies, which in their respective Seasons, were punctually fulfill'd.

In the Passage of the Children of *Israel* thro' the Wilderness, he told them, that in Punishment for their Disobedience, God had decreed, that none of that Generation should come to the promis'd Land, save *Caleb* the Son of *Jephunneh*, and a few others, whom he mention'd by Name; but that they should wander in the Wilderness, till all that Generation were dead. This was literally fulfill'd;

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and consequently, demonstrated the Truth of his Mission.

He farther told them, that when they should be in Possession of that Land, *their Males must all appear before The Lord three Times in the Year*; and that, for their Security at such Times, the Neighbour-Nations, (who, at all others were forward to invade them,) should not desire their Land, nor make Inroads into it.

He farther assur'd them, that since God determin'd, that their Land should have Rest every seventh Year, and they were then neither to sow nor plant, God would provide for their Sustenance that Year, by causing their Lands, in the sixth Year, to produce a double Crop, and a Quantity sufficient for two Years. These are to be judg'd not only as bare Prophecies of something future, but also, as Predictions of continual and standing Miracles.

In the 28th Chapter of *Deuteronomy*, v. 26, and onward, *Moses* denounc'd on them for their Disobedience, their Captivity by the *Affyrians*; the Deduction of the Remainder of the People into *Egypt*; and in the same Chapter declar'd, that in their Sieges, they should be driven *to eat the Flesh of their Sons* *; which

* *Eat the Flesh of their Sons.*] That this was fulfill'd in the Siege of *Jerusalem* under *Titus*, *Josephus* expressly tells us: And in the Siege by *Nebuchadnezzar*, before the *Babylonish*

accordingly beset them in the Sieges of *Samaria* and *Jerusalem*, many Hundreds of Years after this Prophecy; and that too, (as he had foretold,) under the Government of their Kings; whereas, it was long after his Death, that they fell under a Regal Government.

He had, above all this, foreshewn them, not only that there should be among them a Succession of Prophets, whom God would raise up for particular Occasions and Services, but also, that, in his appointed Time, He would send them a Prophet of a more extraordinary Power and Authority, even *Christ*, the anointed; whose Character is describ'd by him, *Deuteron. 18. v. 18.*

The Accomplishment of these Prophecies of *Moses*, so many Centuries of Years after his Death, leaves us no Room to doubt his being sent of God, and his Acting, and Writing by Divine Commission, and Authority. And for the Proof of the same Commission in the succeeding Prophets, and those Writers who compil'd the other Books of the Old Testament, it is sufficient to observe, that they also confirm'd their Mission by express Prophecies.

Babylonish Captivity, it is extremely probable, that they were driven to the Extremity of eating their own Children, from *Jeremiah's* Lamentations, Chap. 4. v. 10. tho', I think that Circumstance is not recorded in any of the *Historical* Writings of that Siege in the Old Testament.

Thus, *the Man of God out of Judah*, who prophesied to *Jeroboam* the Overthrow of his Altar in *Bethel*, assur'd him withal, that this was to be executed by a King, *Josiah* by Name, [*1 Kings*, 13.] tho' *Josiah* was not then born, nor in many Years afterward.

Thus again, *Cyrus* King of *Persia* was by Name foretold by *Isaiah*, a long time before his Birth, as the Subverter of the *Babylonish* Empire, and the Restorer of the Temple, and Worship at *Jerusalem*.

And, not to enter farther into this Point, the Prophecies of *Daniel* were so literal, and have been fulfill'd so exactly, that *Porphyry*, (the great Caviller at Christianity, when it was almost in it's Infancy,) had no Way to evade the Argument, which the *Christians* from thence drew for the Divinity of the Scripture, but by groundlessly, and absurdly suggesting, that these Books were of a later Date, than the Facts which they foretold; and were not Prophecies written, (as the *Christians* aver'd,) before their Completion, but Books of History, and compos'd after the Facts were really transacted. To such wretched Shifts are Men reduc'd, who obstinately resist the Truth; and so meanly will they argue, when press'd by what they cannot answer.

The Time will not suffice me at present to enter on several other Considerations of Moment,

ment, (and particularly the Antiquity of the Sacred Writings,) which have been urg'd with great Force, by several Writers. I am necessitated therefore to pass on to my Second Proposition, which was

2. To evince, that there is the same Proof of the Divine Authority of the *Christian* Dispensation, and the New Testament, as I have already shewn of the Old.

The Evidences of the Divinity of the *Christian* Dispensation are near akin to those of the *Mosaick*. If Miracles be esteem'd a just Confirmation of *Moses's* Mission, they will much more strongly conclude on the Side of *Christ*; the Number which he wrought being so vastly superior, and the Power requisite to some of them so much more extensive than to those perform'd by *Moses*.

A Succession of more than three Years after he enter'd on his Ministry, was little less than one continu'd Series of Miracles. The giving Eyes to the Blind, Feet to the Lamé, Ears to the Deaf, and Tongues to the Dumb, were of the lower Order of his Wonders. The ruling the Rage of the Sea; the stopping the Waves thereof when they arose; the taming boisterous Winds with a *Peace*, — *be ye still*, were ordinary Passages of his Life.

But, what ennobl'd his Miracles, and made them unparallel'd, was, not only the Great-

ness of them, (particularly the raising the Dead to Life,) but also, the Communicating these Powers to his Disciples, and enabling them to do the same, or greater Wonders. Justly therefore did *Nicodemus* make the Inference, *that He was sent of God, because no Man could do those Miracles except God were with him.*

To take off all Suspicion of Forgery and Imposture in these Miracles; and to shew, both that they were truly done at the Time we alledge, and were not the Invention of After-Ages to impose upon Posterity, it must be observ'd, that *Christ* wrought these Miracles, Not in the Presence of a few select Witnesses, — Not before his Disciples and Followers only, — but in the Face of the whole *Jewish* Nation, before Enemies as well as Friends, and upon all Occasions which presented themselves to him.

It must farther be remark'd, that the Four *Gospels*, which contain a Relation of these Miracles, were written and publish'd to the World in a few Years after the Death of *Christ*; and therefore, had the several miraculous Facts recorded in them been forg'd, Nothing could have been easier, than for the *Jews*, and Enemies of *Christ*, to have disprov'd these Facts; to have shewn their Falshood, and to have convicted them of Forgery.

That very Generation of People, in whose Presence

Presence these Miracles are alledg'd to have been wrought, were then still alive: The whole Age could have born Witness to their Falshood; And, as it would have been the highest Impudence, as well as Imprudence in the Evangelists, to have publish'd these Accounts so early, had not the several Facts been true, so it was the easier for their Adversaries to have detected the Imposture, and blast their Credit for ever.

The *Jews* therefore wanted not Power, and Ability, (and we are sure they wanted not Malice, and Inclination proportionable,) to have convinc'd the World of the Falshood of these Miracles, had they never been wrought: And we may assure ourselves they would have done it, if they could. But, quite contrary to this, they confess'd these Miracles; never deny'd the Truth of the Facts; but attributed the Working them to a Confederacy with the Devil, and to the Power of Evil Spirits.

Those Writers of the Gentile World, who most strenuously set themselves to subvert Christianity, (such as *Celsus*, *Hierocles*, *Porphyry*, and *Julian*,) took the same Method, which the *Jews* had done: They found the Credit of our Saviour's Miracles too well supported, and too firmly attested, to be shaken by a Denial of them; and therefore, they ascrib'd them, (as the others likewise had done,) to the

Power of Magick, and the Operation of the Devil. These were the Answers given to this Argument, in the first Ages after *Christ*.

But, the present Enemies to Christianity, have steer'd a different Course from their Predecessors, and taken another Method to destroy this Proof. They are very sensible, that the Devil can, of himself, have no Power to work a Miracle, — at least, that he cannot exercise such a Power independently on God: They are sensible likewise, that God will not grant him such a Power; or, if granted, will not suffer it to be exercis'd against the Truth; i. e. that he will not conspire, and confederate with him against himself. They therefore find themselves necessitated to deny the Truth of the Miracles, as well knowing, that if *Jesus* truly wrought them, the Consequence will unavoidably be good, namely, That he was a true Prophet, and sent of God. Whereas therefore, the ancient *Jews* and *Heathens* allow'd the Truth of the Miracles, but deny'd the Consequence drawn from them, to prove *Christ* a true Prophet, the modern *Deists*, (sensible that this Consequence is unavoidable,) deny the Miracles themselves, and endeavour, in all the ways they can, to banter their Credit.

But, to the Confusion of both these Sorts of Men, Christianity gains an Advantage by their Dissension; and the Argument from
Christ's

Christ's Miracles is hereby more confirm'd. For, that the Miracles were true in Fact, the ancient *Jews*, and *Deists* acknowledge; And, that the Consequence we draw from thence, to prove his being a true Prophet, is good and valid, many of the modern *Deists* acknowledge. These are forc'd to disallow the Facts, which yet their Predecessors confess'd: And the elder *Deists* rejected the Consequence of those Facts, which the later are oblig'd to admit. By this their Disagreement we gain as much, as is sufficient clearly to carry our Cause; i. e. the Confession of the Truth of *Christ's* Miracles from the former, and elder Adversaries; and the Acknowledgement of the Validity of this Argument to prove *Christ's* Divine Mission, from the later and present ones.

But, had we no other Miracles to appeal to, for the Truth of the Christian Revelation, the Resurrection of *Christ* were itself alone a full Proof of his Divine Authority. In his Discourses with the *Jews* he had promis'd them, that after three Days Continuance in the Grave, he would raise himself from the Dead: And upon the Fulfilling of this Promise, he himself, and his Apostles after him, put the whole Stress of his Cause. The *Jewish* Priests had taken all possible Care to prevent all Imposture in this Matter, by sealing the Sepulcher, and procuring a Guard from the Governour.

Governour; That he did really rise again at the Time specify'd, we have the Attestation of all his Disciples, to whom he appear'd for no less than the Space of forty Days together, — to great Numbers of them at the same Time; — to above Five Hundred at once, — of which Resurrection he gave them (as Saint Luke styles it) *infallible Proofs*.

These Persons were Men of Integrity: They could propose no Benefit to themselves by their asserting it, but rather Trouble and Persecution: And a great Part of them afterwards seal'd their Confession with their Blood. This was the greatest Attestation they could give of a Matter of Fact, and that they knew it to be true; Because, tho' it hath frequently happen'd that Men have gladly suffer'd Death for a mistaken Opinion, yet, surely no one was ever yet found, who chose to forego his Life in Attestation of a Fact, which he at the same Time knew to be false.

But, they were not his Followers alone that attested his Resurrection, (as is sometimes pretended by Unbelievers;) For, his Adversaries also did openly confess it. The Guard of Soldiers, who watch'd his Sepulcher, and so were present at his Resurrection, were the first who came into the City, and made known the Fact to the Priests and People; and continu'd to assert it, till prevail'd on by Money to recant it, and

and to charge the Disciples with stealing the Body. *Pontius Pilate* himself gave his Attestation to this Truth, in a Letter which he wrote to The Emperor and Senate of *Rome* upon this Occasion; which Letter was for many Years after extant upon Record at *Rome*, and was publickly appeal'd to by the first Christian Writers, (particularly by *Tertullian*,) in their Apologies for themselves and their Religion.

In a Word; were the Resurrection of *Christ* not true in Fact, but a Fiction and Imposture, this Imposture must have been contriv'd, Either at the Time when we pretend it to have happen'd, (i. e. soon after the Death of *Christ*,) — or else, it must have been contriv'd in some following Ages, and at a Distance from that Time. But, neither of these can, with any Colour of Reason, be pretended.

Not the former; because, if it were then forg'd, the *Jews* had it in their Power to have detected the Cheat, and to have convicted the Contrivers of it of Falshood; a Thing which they never attempted; so far from it, that they rather confess'd the Truth of the Resurrection.

And, that this suppos'd fact could not be the Forgery of After-Ages, nor gain Admission at such a Distance as should render the Discovery of the Imposture more difficult, we have

have this Assurance, that the *Easter-Festival*, which is annually observ'd amongst us in it's Commemoration, bears equal Date with the Time to which we ascribe this Fact; or, if you please, is as old as the Fact, in whose Memory it was instituted. The former is an invincible Proof, that this was not forg'd at the Time of *Christ's* Death; and the latter is an equal Demonstration, that it was not the Invention of After-Ages.

But, Secondly, Prophecies being an equal Proof of a Divine Commission with that of Miracles, and as much as they in the Power of God alone, — where these are found to have been deliver'd, and after many Years to have receiv'd a Completion, they are a sure Character of a Divine Authority. This Proof our Saviour hath very plentifully afforded us, and in abundant Instances manifested this Fore-knowledge.

He very punctually shew'd his Apostles, what Treatment from the *Jews* was to befall his Person, and what Part they themselves would chuse to act when that Time should come. He warn'd them, that the Apostate *Judas* was to betray him; — that the rest should forsake him, and flee; — and that, in particular, the confident and presumptuous *Peter* should, that very Night, thrice forswear even the Knowledge of him.

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The Manner of his own Death he declar'd to be Crucifixion: And, what made this Prophecy the more remarkable, is, that it imply'd and suppos'd his being first given up by the *Jewish* Government, and deliver'd over to the Power of the *Roman* Governour; Crucifixion being a Punishment unknown to the *Jewish* Laws, among whom the Stoning to Death was the Punishment for Blasphemy.

His Resurrection after three Days; His Ascension into Heaven; the Descent of The Holy Ghost; and the plentiful Effusion of miraculous Gifts then confer'd, had been distinctly and explicitly declar'd by him. That the *Jews* would obstinately resist his Doctrine; That they would blindly oppose themselves to it; That they would, with the utmost Violence, persecute it's Propagators; and think they should do God Service in killing and destroying them, — was plainly, and literally declar'd by him in publick. That the Gentiles should receive it with Gladness; that his Gospel should be preach'd to all Nations; and that his Church should be establish'd in such a Manner, that *the Gates of Hell should never prevail against it*; all this was foreshew'd by him in direct and exprefs Terms.

But among all his Prophecies, that of the Destruction of *Jerusalem* is the most remarkable, as being so particularly describ'd by him, and

and withal so punctually and minutely completed. He had said, that *That Generation should not pass away till all was fulfill'd*; And accordingly, *Jerusalem* was destroy'd within forty Years after his Death.

He had told them, that of *That Temple*, not one Stone should be left upon another; And that Temple was so fully raz'd, that the *Romans* plough'd up it's Foundations.

Titus, the General of the *Roman* Army, us'd his utmost Endeavour, and gave the strictest Orders to his Soldiers, to preserve that glorious Fabrick: Yet, even That could not prevent the Effect of our Saviour's Prophecy; the *Jews* themselves, (as their own Historian *Josephus* acquaints us,) hastening the Flames to destroy that Building.

He had farther said, *Then let them which are in Judea flee to the Mountains*: This receiv'd a very remarkable Completion; For, *Cestius Gallus* having laid the first Siege to *Jerusalem*, and after some Time, without any apparent Reason, withdrawing his Army from it, thereby gave Opportunity to such *Christians* as were then in *Jerusalem* to retire to *Pella*, a small City in the neighbouring mountainous Country of *Arabia*; and, by that means, of escaping, both the Calamities of the Siege, (which was presently after renew'd,) and the dreadful Carnage which follow'd the taking of the City.

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Sermon the Third.

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He had farther said, that *there should be Signs in the Heavens*, which should precede, and give Warning of this Disaster: And, that there were such seen, we have the concurrent Testimonies of *Tacitus*, and *Josephus*.

It were easy to enumerate the remaining Particulars, wherein the Prophecy, and the Event so exactly corresponded: It is sufficient to observe, that the Agreement between the Predictions in the Evangelist, and *Josephus's* History of this Siege, is so remarkable, that a Stranger to the History of these Times, would almost be tempted to think, that the One had copy'd, and transcrib'd from the Other. But, as the boldest Enemies of our Faith have not yet dar'd to suggest it, — so the Divinity of that Prophecy must stand confess'd; and, of Consequence, the Divine Authority of that Person who gave it.

But, Thirdly, That the Revelation made by *Jesus of Nazareth*, was, (as he asserted,) a Revelation from God, and not an Imposture of his own, appears from hence; That, as it has all the external Marks of a true Revelation, by which God could most properly recommend one, (that is, Prophecies and Miracles,) so it has also, none of those internal Marks and Characters, by which a Suspicion may be given, and a Probability founded, of it's being a Cheat and Delusion.

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There is not, in all this System; the least Footstep of a Regard to any carnal Interest; or worldly View. An Impostor would never have done, as he did, — have contented himself with that mean and low Condition of Life; — would never have so freely attack'd Vice wherever he found it; — would not have so boldly declaim'd against the *Sadducees*, and *Pharisees*, the most powerful and popular Sects then in *Judæa*; — and would never have declin'd the Throne of his Fathers, when the People sought for him to make him their King. This was an Opportunity, an Impostor would greedily have snatch'd at: But his declining this Opportunity, acquits him of the least Umbrage of that Guilt.

The Methods he took for gaining Protestants to his Doctrine, were the very Reverse of what would have been proper for a Cheat. The surest Way, would have been to have apply'd to their Vices and Follies; — to have made his Court there; — and to have fram'd his Religion with all possible Latitude. On the contrary, he told them, that *they must take up their Cross*; — that they must renounce all that was dear to them; — that they must prepare for Poverty, and Persecution; — must be destitute, afflicted, tormented; — must expect Death in it's most dreadful Appearances; and wade to Heaven thro' a Sea of Blood.

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The internal Marks therefore, which, wherever they are found, are a just Ground for a Suspicion of Imposture, were wanting in the Gospel Revelation. It's greatest Enemies cannot presume to fasten on it any Calumnies of this kind: The Blessed *Jesus* needed no Artifices to recommend his Precepts, being sufficiently supported by the native Excellency of his Religion, as well as the extraordinary external Evidences he produc'd for it.

It remains now, only to improve the Two Propositions before evinc'd, into some practical Inferences.

It having been shewn, that the Revelations by *Moses*, and *Jesus* of *Nazareth*, are of Divine Original and Authority, it becomes our Duty, in the First Place, sincerely to embrace, firmly to believe, and stedfastly to adhere to such Points of Doctrine, as these Books propose to our Faith.

What we there find reveal'd, is undoubtedly true, because we are certain it comes from The God of Truth, who cannot be the Author of any Imposition on our Understandings. There are indeed, Doctrines in Christianity which are above our Reason, and which we have not Capacities fully to comprehend. But, tho' they are confess'd to be *above*, yet it hath never hitherto been prov'd, that they are *contrary to*, Reason; and, after the strictest Search,

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are found to be entirely consistent with it.

There are Difficulties in Natural, as well as Reveal'd Religion: There are Things incomprehensible by human Reason, and yet capable of strict Demonstration. Mysteries therefore, are no valid Objection against Reveal'd Religion: And if we are convinc'd, that the Revelation is true in the general, we are equally sure that every Part of it must be so too.

Secondly, With our Faith it is necessary that our Lives be agreeable, and our Manners conformable to this Divine Revelation. It is not a bare Belief of the Truth of it that will save us, but a Conformity to those Rules it lays down for our Behaviour. *If we know these Things, we are not to be happy unless we do them.* And the Rewards which are propos'd in this holy Religion, are promis'd not to such as only know their Master's Will, but, to such as perform it punctually.

Our Faith is not perfect, unless it shew itself in good Works: And therefore, we should always reckon on this as certain, that an Assent to the Truth of the Christian Religion will not obtain for us the Promises annex'd, unless we perform the several Conditions on which these Promises are made to us.

SERMON

SERMON IV.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

HAVING propos'd, from these Words, to treat on the several Christian Doctrines relating to the holy Scriptures, and the Duties arising from Them, — what hath hitherto been done, hath been, to shew their Divine Original and Authority; as well to confirm those Persons in the Belief of that Truth, who are already perswaded of it, as to confute an Error, which hath of late Years been industriously propagated amongst us, That God hath not, (as there is suppos'd to be no Necessity that he should,) made any Revelation of his Will to Man; and consequently, that the Books of holy Scripture do not contain any such Revelation.

The Method which I have taken to refute this dangerous and pernicious Error, hath consisted of several Steps and Degrees; each of which hath been the Subject of a particular Discourse.

The First contain'd a Proof of The Existence of a God; and consequently, of the Possibility of such a Revelation of his Will as we contend for.

The Second asserted his Attributes of Goodness, Mercy, Holiness and Wisdom; And from the Consideration of these, together with the Deficiency of Natural Religion, and the utter Incapacity of Man to please God by the sole Light of Nature and Reason, I have infer'd the Necessity of making such a Revelation as should effectually lead Men to serve him as they ought.

The Last evinc'd, that, in Consequence of this Necessity, God hath in Fact made such a Revelation; — that this Revelation is contain'd in the Books of the Old and New Testament: And, the Divine Authority of both these Writings have been asserted and prov'd.

The Arguments by which I establish'd the Divine Original of both the Old, and New Testament, and the Authority of their respective Legislators, were taken partly from the external Characters of them, — their being attested by Miracles, and confirm'd by clear Prophecies; and partly, from internal Characters, — the Integrity of their Authors, and their being entirely free from worldly Views and Interests.

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From such undeniable Proofs as these hath it been shewn, that the Revelations contain'd in the Books of the Old, and New Testament, are of Divine Original; and came from God as a Direction to Man, in what he so greatly wanted, the Method by which he might serve God as he ought.

It remains now, that the capital Enemies of Scripture, the *Atheist* and the *Deist*, being thus dismiss'd, I should proceed to State, and Prove, some other Points relating to the Scriptures; the right Apprehension of which will be of general Advantage, both as they will be useful to us in the Conduct of our Lives, and settling our religious Tenets; and as they are made the Subject of some Disputes and Controversies among Christians themselves; and which it is, therefore, of some Importance to be resolv'd in.

The First of these, is, The Perfection of Scripture; under which I shall enquire, Whether the Scripture contains all Things necessary to Salvation; or, Whether some Things were to be transmitted to us by other Means. When we are satisfied that these Books are a Revelation from God, and a Rule for the Worship and Service of him, it very naturally offers itself next to be consider'd, Whether this Rule be itself compleat, and perfect; — or, Whether any Thing be wanting to help

and assist it. The former is the more general and receiv'd Opinion, (in this part of the World at least;) but the latter also hath it's Patrons and Advocates.

To charge the Scripture with Insufficiency, and to assert, that it doth not contain all Things necessary to be believ'd and practis'd, in Order to Salvation, seeming to derogate so much from the Honour of these Writings, and the Wisdom of God himself, in giving us a Rule which is insufficient to the Ends, and unequal to the Purposes for which it was design'd, — it becomes necessary to vindicate it, and to shew the Weakness and Folly of this Pretence. This I shall attempt in the following Discourse; and in order thereto, shall take the following Method;

First, I shall prove the Perfection and Sufficiency of the holy Scripture; and shew, that it contains all Things necessary to be believ'd and practis'd, in order to Salvation.

Secondly, I shall consider the Pretences of those Men who deny this Truth; and shew the Weakness and Falseness of those their Pretences.

Lastly, a few practical Observations on what shall have been said, shall close the whole.

In the First place then, I am to prove the Perfection and Sufficiency of holy Scripture; and shew, that it contains all Things necessary

fary to be believ'd, and practis'd, in order to Salvation.

In speaking to this Matter it must be observ'd, That it is not hereby enquir'd, Whether the holy Scripture contains all, and every Thing, which our Saviour, and his Apostles either said or did, or Whether it be an exact Register of all their Transactions: For, this we readily grant, that great Numbers of such Actions are not transmitted to us; and the History which we have, is not, in that Degree, compleat.

One of the Evangelists hath told us in express Words, that *there are many other Things which our Lord both said and did, which are not written*, since, if they should be so, he supposes that the World itself could not contain the Books that should be written. St Paul hath preserv'd one excellent Apothegm of our Saviour, in the *Acts of the Apostles**, which had otherwise been lost, and never come to our Knowledge; and St Jerome, a Writer of the Fifth Age after Christ, hath recorded another. It is not therefore the Question, Whether the Scriptures contain all the Actions and Rules done, or given by Christ; but, Whether those Rules which it does contain, be sufficient to lead us to Salvation; or, Whether any Rules of Life,

* Acts 20. 35.

any Doctrines necessary to be believ'd, are to be fetch'd from Tradition, and cannot be prov'd from the written Word of God.

Nor farther, is it hereby enquir'd, Whether all the Necessaries to Salvation be found in exprefs Words, and in Terms at Length: For, it is sufficient to our purpose, if they are there found in a just and necessary Consequence; — if they can be deduc'd and infer'd from what is there deliver'd in Terms, and are the necessary Consequences of what is written.

Whatever Proposition we entertain a Belief of, we must necessarily believe all that directly follows from it; — it must carry all it's Train with it; and, for the same Reasons for which we admit the Premises, we shall be necessitated to allow the rational Conclusions.

It is no where, for Instance, said in Scripture in exprefs Terms, That The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, are The One God; Yet, the Name of God being there expressly ascrib'd to each of these, and it being as expressly said, that there is but One God, we must receive the former as an undoubted Truth, because virtually and consequentially included in the latter. It is sufficient therefore, to our asserting the Perfection of Scripture, if some Doctrines which we receive, be none other than the natural, and unforc'd Consequences of what is there express'd.

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Nor farther, is it in this Question enquir'd, Whether the Scriptures are so perfect, as to leave no Room, and Use for some Traditions; — Whether none of these may be safely admitted; — or, Whether all Traditions are to be rejected as utterly unserviceable. For, we are not so strait-lac'd as to affirm, that all Traditions ought to be rejected: So far from it, that we retain not a few of them, and conform to many that appear to be ancient. But, what we assert, is, that God hath left no one Article, either of Faith or Manners, to be supported by Tradition only; — that all these are transmitted to us in Scripture; — that, whatever cannot fairly be prov'd from thence, is not to be requir'd as necessary to Salvation; — and, that the Traditions which we receive, and with which we comply, are not such as relate to the Necessaries of Faith, — but concern only Rites, Discipline, and Things in their own Nature indifferent.

That the Scripture is thus perfect; that it is a compleat Rule both of Faith and Manners; and that it contains all Things that are necessary to Salvation, is evident from the Words of Scripture itself. It having been already evinc'd, that these Books are of Divine Original, it must follow, that whatever is there asserted, must be strictly true; and therefore, tho' in other Cases, it might be a just Exception

ption to this Way of arguing, that it is a Testimony which comes from itself, and so ought not to be valud, yet, in the present Dispute, this Self-Testimony cannot be refus'd; because it comes from such Hands as cannot possibly deceive.

When it is granted that this was written by Divine Inspiration, (which is granted by the Persons whom I am now opposing,) the Evidence of Scripture, as to its own Perfection, cannot be refus'd. And, that the Scripture doth thus testify of its own Perfection, we have a direct Proof in the following Words of St. Paul to Timothy, Epist. 2. Ch. 3. v. 15. and onwards; *The Scriptures are able to make thee wise unto Salvation, thro' Faith which is in Christ Jesus: All Scripture is given by Inspiration of God, and is profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness; that the Man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnish'd unto all good Works.*

The several Assertions here made, are positive and strong: It is affirm'd, that *they* are *sufficient to make us wise unto Salvation*; — and if so, what is there farther requisite to us, and what more can Man desire? It is affirm'd, that *they* are *profitable both for Doctrine and for Instruction in Righteousness*: and what is this but, in other Words, that they are a compleat Rule both of Faith and Manners? Lastly, it

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is affirm'd, that by *them the Man of God*, (i. e. the Teacher of God's People, the Instructor of the Christian Flock, as *Timothy* was, to whom these Words are directed,) *may be made perfect, and thoroughly furnish'd unto all good Works*: But what more is requir'd to the Flock, that is not necessary to it's Teacher; and what is there more laid on the *Christians* under his Care, than was laid on *Timothy*, to whose Charge they were committed?

It is farther observable, that, at the Time when *St Paul* wrote this Epistle, a great Part of the New Testament was not as yet written: Many of those Books are of a later Date: The Gospel of *St John*, we are certain, was penn'd last of the whole Number; And the greater Part of *St Paul's* own Epistles, were written after these to *Timothy*. This Consideration makes our Argument much stronger, and adds considerably to it's Weight. If what was then already written were *able to make Men wise unto Salvation*, much more was it so, when the Canon of Scripture was compleated: If the few Books, then penn'd, were a sufficient Rule, much greater is the united Light which flows from them all: And if, singly taken, they could make the Man of God perfect, with more Certainty can they produce that Effect when taken collectively.

But Secondly, If any Thing necessary to Salvation

vation be not contain'd in holy Scripture, this must have happen'd, either because *Christ* did not reveal the whole Will of God to The Apostles; or, because The Apostles did not declare it to their Followers. But, we have the greatest Assurance, that neither of these Suggestions can be true: For, the former is repugnant to the Declaration of our Saviour himself, [*John 15. 15.*] where he assures his Disciples, that *he had made known unto them all Things which he had heard from the Father*: And the latter is as repugnant to what we read *Acts 20. v. 21.* that The Apostles *shunn'd not to declare unto us the whole Council of God*. Hence it appears, both that *Christ* reveal'd all, and his Apostles declar'd all; and therefore, that Nothing relies on Tradition only, but every Part of our Duty is consign'd to Writing.

And indeed, any other Proceeding would not have been agreeable to the Wisdom of God. Whilst our Saviour continu'd on Earth, the Books of Scripture could not be written; because the Design of his Mission was not as yet compleated, nor our Redemption finish'd and clos'd. Whilst his Apostles continu'd, a Spirit of Infallibility rested upon them, which was sufficient to answer all the Ends of the Church of *Christ*. But, that Spirit being to be withdrawn with The Apostles, and not to be communicated to other Men after their Departure,

parture, it became necessary, that every Article either of Faith or Manners, requisite to Salvation, should be consign'd to Writing; the only Method capable of conveying them to succeeding Ages, entire, sincere, and uncorrupted.

But Thirdly, The very End, and Design of the holy Scripture, is a sufficient Proof, that it is full and compleat in all the Necessaries to Salvation. These Books were given us as a *Lantern to our Feet, and a Light to our Paths*; They were to lead us into the Knowledge of all Truth; and to succeed in the Place of that instructive Spirit, which plentifully influenc'd our Saviour and his Apostles. This being their End, of what Benefit would they be to us, and how could they answer their Design, were they not perfect and compleat? We might indeed follow their Directions; — might sincerely embrace every Doctrine they propose; — might discharge every Duty they exact; but after all, could never be assur'd of Salvation, since possibly, some Point of Faith, or some Duty of Life, not mention'd or recommended by them, but relying solely on Tradition, might have escap'd our Knowledge, or not fallen within our Practice.

The End therefore of the holy Scripture being thus not answer'd, if it be not a compleat Rule; Salvation being thus render'd precarious;

carious; and the Performance of our Duty uncertain, we may very rationally infer, that the Wisdom of God was concern'd to make this Rule fully comprehensive, and to include the whole Duty expected from Man.

Fourthly, when we reflect, that in the holy Scriptures we meet with many Things recorded, the Knowledge of which is confessedly not necessary to Salvation, we may justly argue, that at least all the necessary Matters are there included; it being altogether unaccountable, Why Care should be taken to inform us of lesser Matters, whilst the greater, and more important, are pass'd over in Silence.

The Genealogies of the *Jewish* Families; — the Structure of their Temple; — the Rites of Worship observ'd in it; and the historical Relation of their Kings, their Battles, and their Course of Actions, are particularly describ'd, and deliver'd down to us with the utmost Care, and Exactness. These are of little Use to the Generality of Readers: They produce no Benefit to the Bulk of Mankind, and must be own'd not to be of Necessity, even to the few, to whom they are yet useful. But, is it credible, that God would permit so large a Part of the Sacred Writings, to be fill'd up with Matter so unnecessary to our Knowledge, whilst those which are necessary to our Salvation should

should not there find a Place? Is it suitable to the Divine Wisdom, to record such a Variety of Matters, which are in a manner useless to the far greater Part of Mankind, and yet not set before them such Parts of their Duty, without the Knowledge of which eternal Life is not to be attain'd? This would be such a Proceeding, as is absolutely irreconcilable with the Goodness, and Wisdom of God.

But farther; To those who deny the Perfection and Sufficiency of Scripture, we might propose the Demand, What Part is there either of Faith or Manners, the Belief, and Practice of which is requisite to Salvation, which is not contain'd in the Books of holy Scripture? And, What Article is there of the whole Counsel of God, which is not there to be met with? Have we not the Nature, and Attributes of God very clearly laid before us? Is not the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Son of God, very largely and particularly recounted? Is not the Practice of all Kinds of Virtue very strongly recommended? Are not the Motives to practice them, urg'd in the most powerful Strains that can possibly be devis'd? And, are not those Vices, which will lead us into Damnation, repeatedly, and in the most forcible manner caution'd against? What then can our Adversaries advance against the Perfection of Scripture, when they cannot

cannot instance in any one particular, wherein these Books can be shewn to be deficient?

Human Additions have indeed, in some Churches of *Christians*, been made to the Rule of Faith; and divers Matters have been declar'd necessary to Salvation, which are not recorded in Scripture, but rather contradicted by it: The Creed of the first Ages hath been enlarg'd; and an equal Number of Articles been added to it. But, as these are the Doctrines of Men; As they are not warranted by *Christ*, or his Apostles; As they are human Impositions, and of worldly Growth; so are they to be regarded as of no other than human Authority; as the Inventions, and Impositions of Men; as void of the Divine Stamp and Character; and unwarrantable Innovations on the ancient, and only true Faith.

Lastly, it is no small Confirmation of the Perfection and Sufficiency of Scripture, that it hath the Voice, and Concurrence of all Antiquity on it's Side. The most Primitive *Christians*, (who by living nearer the Beginning, and Fountain of Truth, had much better Opportunity of knowing it, than we their remote Posterity,) universally maintain'd this Truth; and by strictly adhering to it, preserv'd themselves entire, and their Faith uncorrupted from those many Errors, which succeeding Ages introduc'd; and which generally took their Rise from

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from the contrary Perswasion, that the Scriptures are incomplete.

Our earliest Predecessors in Religion, receiv'd Nothing as of Faith, but what they learnt from Scripture: To *this* they always made their Appeal: Out of *this* they refuted Hereticks: And they rejected whatever was offer'd, which had not *this* Foundation.

And that this was their Tenet, was become so notorious, that even their Persecutors were acquainted with it: Such of the Heathens as pursu'd them and their Religion with the utmost Malice, we are told, could not devise a more short and expeditious Method to extirpate Christianity, than by demanding their Bibles, and committing them to the Flames. They imagin'd, if they could get into their Hands all the Copies of that Book, they should, of Consequence, root out their Religion. Hence it is evident, that the first *Christians* knew of no Doctrines of Faith, not contain'd in Scripture; and embrac'd no Principles, which rely'd wholly on Tradition.

But I hasten, Secondly, to consider the Pretences of those Men, who deny the Perfection of Scripture; and to shew the Weakness and Falshood of their Pretences.

The Perfection of holy Scripture is deny'd and impeach'd, by two Sorts of Men: The One, the *Romish* Church, who place Tradition
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upon the same Level, and give it the same Authority, with Scripture; The Other, a Sect of our own Nation, whose Numbers have made no inconsiderable Figure in this, and the last Century.

These latter, pretending to (I know not what) extraordinary Measures of The Spirit, the Workings of The Holy Ghost within them, and to a Degree of Perfection, much superior to what the Scriptures can produce, or to what they were actuated with who penn'd these Books, are wont to express themselves in very slight Terms when they mention these Writings. They usually call them, *The Letter of the Scripture*; — *the dead Letter*; — *insufficient, inefficacious*; — *the Sheath, the Scabbard, the Bark, the Shadow*; — *a Carcase void of internal Light, and not capable of imprinting on us a Knowledge of what is necessary to Salvation*. They assert, that *The Scriptures are but as the Handmaid to higher and more perfect Knowledge*; that they are useful only to Children and Babes in Christ; that they are the beggarly Elements and Rudiments, proper for young Beginners: But, as these advance towards Perfection, they have the Spirit residing in them, and are above all Ordinances and positive Institutions. In Pursuance of this Principle, they have discarded both the Sacraments; and make their own Judgment, (which is erroneously suppos'd to be the Spirit of

of God,) the Rule of their Actions, and of all their Divine Worship.

It is very easy to observe, how dangerous and pernicious this Principle is: It introduces an uncertain, unfix'd Religion; and *that* is almost the same, with no Religion. Any the most whimsical Extravagancies of a sick Constitution, or a disorder'd Brain, — any the wildest Enthusiasm, may be mistaken for this suppos'd Inspiration; and may pass for it the more easily, since these People have no certain standing Rules, by which to examine these suppos'd Suggestions of The Spirit, and to form a Judgment, whether they proceed from God or no.

The Consequence of this is, that Men's Imaginations being different from each other, — nay, those of the same Man being, at different Times, exceedingly various, Religion must be varied, and made subject to infinite Changes. Thus a Religion is introduc'd, which wanders from Fancy to Fancy; alterable by every new Illusion; and reducible to no kind of Order.

We have seen these unhappy Effects of the Pretensions to the Spirit, and the imaginary Light within. The solemn Ordinances of *Christ*, *Baptism* and the *Eucharist*, are disus'd and neglected, tho' instituted by their Author, as of perpetual Use.

As to Baptism in particular, they may con-

sider, that *That* Sacrament would be necessary to them, even tho' it were true, that they are already possess'd of the Spirit of God, and Masters of all his Gifts: For it is observable, that *St Peter* (in the tenth Chapter of *The Acts of the Apostles*, v. 47, 48.) commanded that *Cornelius*, and the other Converts at *Cesarea*, should be baptiz'd, notwithstanding *The Holy Ghost* had already fallen on them. *Can any Man*, saith He, *forbid Water*, that these should not be baptized, who have received *The Holy Ghost* as well as we? So that, tho' it should be granted to these Enthusiasts, that they have that Spirit to which they lay Claim, yet, Water-Baptism would nevertheless be necessary to them, according to the Judgment and Practice of *Saint Peter*.

From these, I pass on to those Other Persons, who deny the Sufficiency and Perfection of Scripture, the pretended Catholick Church of *Rome*. These, in order to recommend their Doctrine of Traditions, (upon which indeed all their Usurpations are establish'd, and which must clearly sink, if that Doctrine be rejected,) are confident in asserting, that *The Scripture* of itself, is not a compleat Rule of Faith; but, that our Saviour and his Apostles, have consign'd certain Truths, which are necessary to Salvation, to be transmitted by Tradition, and taught us by that Method.

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With what Probability of Truth this is averr'd by them, will appear, to any Man who will reflect on the Behaviour of *Christ* towards The *Jewish* Church, in this very Matter concerning Tradition. In his Conferences with the *Pharisees* and the Doctors of that Church, he loudly and frequently complain'd of their having corrupted their Religion, by that great Deference they paid to the Traditions of their Elders. He roundly told them, that by these Traditions, they had made the Laws of God of none Effect: And, that *they worshipped God in vain, when they taught for Doctrines the Commandments of Men.* Matt. 15. 9.

Can any Man then prevail on himself to believe, that our Saviour *Christ*, having so fresh an Instance, and so sensible an Example before his Eyes, of the mischievous Consequences of relying on Traditions, should yet leave any one of the Points necessary to Salvation, to be preserv'd and maintain'd in his Church, by no other Way than by Tradition? Is it not the highest Absurdity to think, that He, who upon all Occasions, bitterly inveigh'd and declaim'd against this Method of conveying Religion, and at large lay'd open the ill Effects it had produc'd, should yet act so inconsistently with himself, as to retain and establish in the *Christian* Church, what he had with so much Reason condemn'd amongst the *Jews*?

Every considering Man cannot but conclude, that it is altogether unlikely, Our Saviour should reserve any Part of the Necessaries to Salvation, to be deliver'd down by Tradition, when He himself was so fully convinc'd, of the Impossibility of preserving them entire and uncorrupted, when committed to that Method.

But, it may be demanded, What are those Doctrines, whose Belief is necessary to Salvation, — but, which are founded on Tradition only, and are not contain'd in, nor deducible from Scripture? In Answer to this, they are not ashamed to instance, in the Practice of *Infant-Baptism*, and the Doctrine of *The Blessed Trinity*; neither of which, they tell us, can be prov'd from Scripture, but must rest on the Authority of Tradition only.

Yet, the very contrary to this hath been often shewn; and both *The Trinity* and *Infant-Baptism* have been, by many Hands, evinc'd, to be as clearly deducible from the sacred Writ, as any other Doctrine of Christianity whatsoever.

The Proof of these from Scripture, would engage me in a Field too large for the present Time; yet, I cannot but observe upon this Occasion, how perniciously to Religion in general these Men act, who, for the sake of establishing this false Position, their Doctrine concerning Traditions, will be content to give
such

such Advantages to the Enemies of *Christ's* Divinity, as to confess, that The Doctrine of *The Trinity* cannot be prov'd from Scripture.

A few practical Inferences from what hath been said, are now, in the Last Place, to close the whole.

Hence therefore, let us be instructed To reverence The Scripture, in proportion to it's Plenitude, and to esteem it suitably to it's Perfection. The Gospels have left us no Room for Art: and Curiosity, as it ought not, so neither hath it wherein to indulge itself. The Sufficiency of Scripture, will appear to us with the greater Lustre and Advantage, when we reflect, into What Complications of Errors and gross Mistakes Men have fallen, when they have stray'd from this Light, and follow'd other Guides.

Traditions, on the One Hand, have been made the Tool to establish the Papal Usurpations: And, on the Other, by imaginary Pretensions to inward Light, and extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit, the whole of *Christianity* hath been well nigh sunk in Enthusiasm and Fanaticism. Those only have been secur'd from such Corruptions, who have adher'd to the Sufficiency of Scripture: And it is That Principle alone, which is the Foundation of the Protestant Faith.

Secondly, and to have done; The Scriptures

appearing to have been given us as a compleat Rule, let us from thence only fetch our Principles, both in Faith and Practice. *Where is it written?* was the Question always put by the first Christians, to such as advanc'd new Doctrines; and they herein went by that most sure Rule, that, whatsoever is new in Religion, is, for that Reason, False. The whole of *Christianity* was reveal'd at it's first Setting-out; and God hath not here, as in Arts and Sciences, left a Place for human Inventions, or Improvements. We are to look backward for our Faith and Religion; but to look forward for Nothing, except the great Reward of it in eternal Glory.



SERMON

SERMON V.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

IN my last Discourse on these Words, I treated concerning The Sufficiency and Perfection of Holy Scripture; under which Head, I shew'd at large, that it contains all, and every Thing necessary to be believ'd, or practis'd, in order to Salvation; — that it is a compleat Rule, both of Faith and Manners; — that whatsoever is not therein contain'd, either expressly, and in Words, or by just and rational Consequence, must not be requir'd to be believ'd or practis'd, as absolutely requisite to Salvation; and consequently, that there is no Necessity of having Recourse to Tradition, as the *Romanists* aver, for any necessary Points of Doctrine or Manners; or to any imaginary Light within, any fancy'd Suggestions, or more perfect Communications of God's Holy Spirit, as is the vain Pretence of the *Quakers*.

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It appearing then, that the Scriptures are a compleat Rule, and contain all Things requisite to be believ'd and practis'd; it comes now, as next in order, to be Enquir'd, Whether the several Articles of Faith and Manners, be *there* laid before us, clearly and intelligibly, to the common Understandings of Men; or, Whether so obscurely and darkly, that it is necessary to have Recourse to a living infallible Judge, in order to a right settling their Intent and Meaning.

The pretending an Obscurity in the Scripture, and an Insufficiency in *Christians* in general, to understand and comprehend it's Sense, hath been vouch'd as a Reason and Foundation, for two unwarrantable Acts of Usurpation on the Rights of all *Christians*; The One, the taking away the Use of the Scripture from the *Laitie*, and locking it up in a Tongue not understood by them; The Other, the setting up in the Church a living and infallible Judge, to whom (it is affirm'd) all *Christians* are to resort in doubtful and disputable Cases, and to whose Determinations they are to submit their Consciences.

The Foundation of both these Pretensions will be taken away, and the Honour of The Scripture and God's Goodness be clear'd and vindicated, when it shall be fully made appear, (as, I hope, in the present Discourse it will be

be made appear,) that The Sacred Writings, as to all the Necessaries to Salvation, are sufficiently clear and perspicuous.

In handling this Subject, (the Clearness and Intelligibleness of Scripture,) I shall make Use of the following Method;

First, I shall shew, How far we acknowledge The Scriptures to be obscure; and what have been the Occasions which have render'd them so.

Secondly, I shall evince, that notwithstanding this confess'd Obscurity of the Holy Scripture, in certain respects, which will have been mention'd, yet, that in all Necessaries of Faith and Manners, it is sufficiently clear and intelligible.

Thirdly, I shall return Answers to the principal Arguments which have been advanc'd; and from whence the Obscurity of Scripture hath been urg'd and inferr'd.

Lastly, from these several Heads, I shall infer a few practical Uses; such as will naturally result from the Subject before us.

In the First Place then, I am to shew, How far we do acknowledge the Scripture to be obscure; and What have been the Occasions that have render'd it so.

The Obscurities which we acknowledge in Scripture, are not such as relate to any Article either of Faith or Manners, the Knowledge

ledge or Practice of which is necessary to our attaining eternal Life; (for as to all these, it will be shewn, under the Second Head of this Discourse, that the Scripture is very clear and intelligible;) but only in some other respects; in Things extrinsecal and foreign from these Necessaries. And, as this Obscurity is confess'd by the Holy Scripture itself, (St *Peter* telling us in expresse Words, that amongst the Subjects of St *Paul's* Writings, *there are some Things hard to be understood*;) so, this Obscurity cannot be fairly objected against the Scripture, till all those Reasons have been duly weigh'd, which have contributed to it; because, if these Reasons shall be found such, as unavoidably make it obscure in some Things, which are not fundamental, such it's Obscurity, arising from that Necessity, will reasonably be accounted for. I shall therefore, briefly touch on a few of those Causes, which have render'd some Parts of Scripture less clear, and intelligible; but which yet, do not render it so in any of the Necessaries to Salvation.

Many Parts of Holy Scripture consisting of *Prophecies*, some of which are, and others are not yet compleated, — it is not at all surprizing, that such Places are obscure; because all Prophecies must necessarily be so. Prophecies are not to be written and communicated in expresse and positive Terms: Nor would it, upon
many

many Accounts, have been suitable to the Wisdom of God, so to have reveal'd them.

They might then have been look'd on, rather as Histories, than Prophecies: They might have entrench'd on the Liberty and Freedom of such Men, as were to be the Instruments of accomplishing them; and it might have been said, that the Agents in compleating them, acted as they did, with a sole View to their Accomplishment. Thus, for Instance, In the Manner of our Saviour's Apprehension and Crucifixion, were fulfill'd several Prophecies of the Old Testament relating to The *Christ*. But, if these Prophecies had been deliver'd in a more open and literal Method, in all Probability, That Crucifixion would never have happen'd: For it is not to be conceiv'd, that either the *Jews* would have plotted his Death, *Judas* have betray'd him, or *Pilate* have condemn'd him, had they known that He was the Person foretold in these Prophecies. For these Reasons, Prophecies must necessarily be obscure; and of Consequence, the Books must be so, in which they are contain'd.

So again, the Revelation of St *John* is so obscure and unintelligible, that it hath hitherto baffled the Skill of the greatest Interpreters. The Reason is plain; because it contains Prophecies, not yet accomplish'd; and therefore must be obscure, till they are accomplish'd.

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But, as the Knowledge of these Prophecies is not necessary to our Salvation, so, the Obscurity of that Book, is no valid Argument against the Clearness of Scripture, in Matters of Faith.

Again; The Scripture is necessarily obscure in some Parts, because the Doctrines which they contain, are not thoroughly to be comprehended by us. Thus, when it speaks of the Infinite Attributes of God; of the Distinction, and Plurality of Persons in the Godhead; of the Union of *Two* Natures in the *One* Person of *Christ*; of God's eternal Counsel, and Decrees; and of the Resurrection of the same Body to an everlasting Estate, it cannot be expected, that the Words of Scripture should be clear and perspicuous, if the Doctrines, couch'd under them, are incomprehensible to our Capacities. The Words indeed, have Ideas annex'd to them; and so far as that goes, we comprehend their Sense: But, when the Truths, they contain, exceed the Limits of our Understanding, it is no Wonder that such Passages are difficult and obscure.

Farther; The Sacred Writings are render'd obscure to Us, of these distant Ages, by our Ignorance of the *Jewish* Usages and Customs, to which frequent Allusions are made. That People had a great Variety of Customs, peculiar to their Nation; which being *then* well known, and alluded to as such, but since that

Time

Sermon the Fifth.

III

Time diffus'd and grown obsolete, have given Rise to most of the Difficulties occurring in Scripture.

The Learning and Wisdom of ancient Ages, (especially in the Eastern Countries, amongst whom alone Learning was to be found,) consisted chiefly in dark Sayings, and Parables. They cloath'd their Knowledge in mystical and obscure Terms; and dress'd it up in *Fables, Proverbs, Allegories*, and short *Enigmatical Sentences*. *Solomon* describes Wisdom itself (*Prov. 1. 6.*) by, *the Understanding a Proverb, and the Interpretation; the Words of the Wise, and their dark Sayings*. And, the Experiment which the *Queen of Sheba* made of *Solomon's* Knowledge, (*1. Kings 10. 1.*) was, by *proving him with hard Questions*.

It is not then to be wonder'd at, that the Holy Scriptures, the Treasure of ancient Learning, are obscure to us, to whom so little of that ancient Learning is transmitted. It is rather surprizing, that they are not more obscure than they are: and especially, when we add, their having gone thro' the Hands of so great a Number of Interpreters and Commentators; a Set of Writers, who ('tis justly observ'd) do rather puzzle difficult Passages, and render them more intricate, than illustrate and clear them up.

In a Word, The Obscurity of Holy Scripture
being

being only in such Matters, as are not necessary to Salvation, the remaining Difficulties of it may turn to our Benefit, and justly be esteem'd as Favours and Mercies from God. For, to such as are self-conceited, they may prove a Judgment; may mortify their Pride, and abate their Confidence; And to such as are lowly in their own Eyes, they may serve for a Confirmation of their Humility; may exercise and encourage that Diligence, which is necessary for the explaining them.

I go on now, Secondly, to evince, that (notwithstanding this confess'd Obscurity in those respects which have been mention'd, yet) in all the Necessaries to our Salvation, both of Faith, and Manners, the Holy Scriptures are sufficiently clear, and intelligible to us.

But here it must be remember'd, that when we affirm, that in all the Necessaries to Salvation, both of Faith, and Manners, the Scriptures are sufficiently clear and intelligible, this is not to be understood indifferently, and promiscuously, of all Kinds of Men; of Unbelievers as well as Believers; of Infidels as well as Christians; and of Unregenerate Persons as well as the Regenerate. The Truths of the Christian Religion, are not equally apparent to Persons of these so different Characters; nor do the same Arguments carry the same convictive Force, nor seem alike strong
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and conclusive to each of their Apprehensions. The Prejudices and Prepossessions of Unbelievers, make that Way of Reasoning lose all it's Force, which, to an Heart and Mind well-dispos'd to it's Reception, appears irresistible.

This Distinction is agreeable to what Saint Paul asserts, 2. Cor. 4. v. 2, &c. where, after he had given the greatest Testimony to the Perspicuity of Scripture, in calling it *the Manifestation of the Truth*, he yet, in the very next Verse allows, that it is possible that this Gospel may be hid, and not seem convictive to every Understanding: For, says he, *if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom The God of this World hath blinded the Minds of them who believe not; lest the Light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine unto them.*

Nor farther, do we assert, that the Scripture is equally clear even to Christians, who profess a Belief of it. The natural Capacities, and Apprehensions of Men are widely different from each other: And these their native Faculties receive more or less Improvement, as they have been more or less cultivated by a liberal Education. Hence it comes to pass, that what seems obscure to One Person, hath not the Face of any Difficulty to Another; and One strains, as at a knotty Point, when Another wonders, what should occasion the

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Doubt.

Doubt. In the mean while, the Words of Scripture are the same to both: The Difficulties are of Men's own creating; and justly to be charg'd, Not on the suppos'd Perplexity of the Writings, but on the Shortness and Deficiency of Men's Capacity and Understanding.

Nor Farther, by this Clearness which we ascribe to Scripture, is it intended, that in the several Articles of Faith, and Manners, it is equally clear in all the several Places, in which such Articles are mention'd. For, it is certain, that the same Duties, which are, in one Place recommended in the most plain and obvious Terms, are deliver'd in other Parts of Scripture, with much Darkeness, and Ambiguity. This, as it is very true, so it may very safely be allow'd, without impeaching the Clearness of Scripture.

It is sufficient to clear the Scriptures in general from Obscurity, if every Duty of Man be clearly reveal'd in any one Text of it. In this Case, common Prudence will direct us to interpret the doubtful Passages, by those of the same Purport, which are clearer, and more explicit; and these latter will serve, as a Key, to unfold the genuine Sense of such as are more abstruse. The intricate Parts of Scripture are to be expounded, by those of a clearer Texture.

But, if no such can be found, whereby they may be expounded, we may then rest assur'd,
that

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that the Precept therein contain'd, is no way necessary to eternal Life: For, had it been the Pleasure of God, that we should, in such Places, have understood him more clearly, in Justice he would have been concern'd, to have deliver'd himself more clearly.

Nor, Lastly, by ascribing a Clearness to the Holy Scripture, do we exclude the Necessity, and great Usefulness of human Helps and Assistances, toward the discovering it's Sense. It is certain, they are not so clear in all particulars, but that, in order to a compleat Knowledge of them, there is great Need of Industry, and Application; of close and strict Reasoning; of more than ordinary Judgment and Discretion; of Care and Exactness in comparing parallel Texts; of some Skill and Knowledge in the Languages they were originally written in: And after all these, there may, perhaps, be a Necessity of making use of the Instructions and Guidance of abler Persons, whose more immediate Province it is, to be the Masters and Preservers of sacred Knowledge. These human Helps are sometimes useful, notwithstanding the Clearness of Scripture we contend for.

And indeed, it is but reasonable, and suitable to the Wisdom of God, that, after he had given us those noble Faculties of Understanding, Reason, and other Helps, whereby to find

out Truth, there should be Room left, and some Kind of Necessity lay'd on us, to employ those Faculties in that Business chiefly, which is most worthy of them, — the searching out the Will, the Laws, and the Commandments of God.

In a Word; when we assert, that the Scriptures are sufficiently clear in all the Necessaries to Salvation, we do not, hereby, oppose ourselves to all human Industry; but only, to that Necessity which The *Romanists* contend for, of a living, visible, and infallible Interpreter of the Word of God; and, to whose Expositions and Determinations, we ought to yield an implicit Obedience.

It might, perhaps, be of Service to the Church of *Christ*, if there were such an infallible Interpreter by him appointed, to whose Decisions Men might have Recourse in a Difference of Opinions: But, we cannot argue, that, because it would be convenient there should be such, therefore there actually is one: Nor is it a safe Way of Proceeding to believe, that, for Conveniency's sake, God hath appointed such a Judge, when there is not the least Appearance of Proof that he hath done so. There is a much greater Probability of Truth in the very opposite way of Arguing; and it is more rational to conclude, that, since God hath no where appointed in his Church such

an infallible Interpreter of Scripture, therefore there is no want of such a one; and that can only be, because the Scriptures are, of themselves, sufficiently plain and clear, in all necessary Points; as I now proceed to shew, by direct Proofs and Evidences, that they are so.

The First Argument I shall produce to this Purpose, shall be taken from the Goodness of God. Whatever he hath made necessary to our Belief or Practice, He, according to all the Rules of Goodness, was concern'd to make knowable and intelligible to us; Otherwise, he could not in Justice demand our Performance of it. Hard surely it must be, to oblige Men to certain Duties, under the Penalty of eternal Damnation, which Duties yet were not clearly and distinctly lay'd before them.

Were God's Commands express'd dubiously, there would be an equal Chance, whether we understood them or not; and Man could not be blam'd, that he mistook in his Faith, or Practice. A Law cannot oblige our Conscience to Submission, till it is sufficiently promulg'd; But surely, no Man will say, That Law is sufficiently promulg'd, the Sense of which is far from being obvious, or, which is capable of a double Interpretation.

The Mysteries of Religion God's Wisdom oblig'd him to make impenetrable to us, and to remove them beyond the Reach of our

strictest Search and Enquiry: But at the same Time, all the other Parts of it, which He hath made it our indispensable Duty to know, and the Want of which Knowledge He hath decreed to punish everlastingly, his Justice, and his Goodness were concern'd distinctly and explicitly to declare to us.

o If this be not rational, we must imagine him acting the Part of an *Egyptian* Task-master; exacting from us, under the severest Penalties, a Conformity to his Precepts, and yet hedging in those Precepts, and fencing them from our Knowledge. In a parallel Case, our Saviour himself hath determin'd, that *the Servant who knew not his Master's Will, ought to be beaten with but few Stripes only*: But, if the Scriptures be obscure, and yet Man is to be eternally punish'd for not living up to them, This would be, to be beaten with *many* Stripes, tho' the Servant knew not his Master's Will.

o In the Old Testament, God is frequently pleas'd to appeal to our own Judgments, for a Vindication of his Proceedings with us; and to command us to reason with him, after our own Ways and Methods of Thinking: But, according to this Permission, can any Thing favour of greater Hardship, than, first to set before us a Law which we cannot understand, and then, to require our Obedience to it, under the Penalty of Damnation? This would

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apparently be such a Proceeding, as, from one Man to another, would justly deserve a very hard Name; and must, (if embrac'd, and believ'd by us,) furnish us with such Thoughts and Notions of God, as are altogether unbecoming that Just, Good, and Gracious Being.

But, Secondly, from the very End and Design of the Holy Scripture it is evident, that, in all the Essentials to Salvation, it is abundantly clear and explicit. The Holy Ghost intended these Writings to be a Rule and Guide, not only to the Wise and the Knowing, not only to the Learned and Adept, but to the whole Bulk of Mankind; to the Ignorant, and Unlearned; to the Rude; to Babes in Knowledge, and Novices in Literature.

The several Epistles of *St Paul* are inscrib'd, not to The Bishops and Clergy of the respective Churches, but in general, *to all the Saints, and all that call on the Lord Jesus.* The Design, therefore, of these Writings, being visibly to inform and instruct all Men, of what Capacity soever, this Design is in no wise comply'd with, if these Writings be not intelligible to all Degrees of Men, and afford a suitable Instruction to every particular Genius.

St Paul, in the fifteenth Chapter to *The Romans*, tells us, that *whatsoever Things were written aforetime, were written for our Learning; — that he himself was a Debtor both to the Wise*

and to the Unwise. St Luke asserts, that the Reason of writing his Gospel was, that we might know the Certainty of those Things, that are believ'd among Christians. And St John, that we may know, that we have eternal Life, and that we may believe on the Name of The Son of God. These Passages manifestly declare the Design of Scripture, and the Intention of The Holy Ghost in inspiring it, is, that it should be of universal Use and Instruction.

But, is it credible, that these Things should be professedly written for our Learning; and yet written in such a Manner, as to be above our Learning? Would St Paul profess himself a Debtor to the Unwise; and yet write so obscurely, that the Unwise should not profit by him? Could St Luke write his Gospel, that we might know the Certainty of Things; and yet leave us, after all, in the utmost Uncertainty? Could the Holy Ghost propose a Design of instructing all Men; and yet write so perplexedly, that his Sense is obscure and doubtful? That all-perfect Spirit is, questionless, a Wise Agent; and, as such, must pursue his Ends by using the most proper and effectual Means: But, in order to make Men understand the Will of God, is it a proper Mean to deliver it to them darkly and confusedly, or to veil it from their Understandings in a Writing unintelligible?

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What Notion must we entertain of the Prudence and Wisdom, both of God, and the Apostles, who intending a Body of Laws to be of universal Use, have yet so contriv'd and express'd them, as to render their Sense dubious? It is apparent, that Nothing can be the Object of our Belief or Knowledge, but what we understand: And it is as certain, that Nothing can be properly understood by us which is doubtful: Either, therefore, the Scriptures are clear in all the necessary Articles, or else they cease to be the Objects of our Faith and Knowledge. But, as this last, that the Scriptures are the Objects of our Faith, is a Truth confess'd by all Christians, so it does necessarily establish the Truth of the former.

Thirdly, amongst other Duties which God hath enjoin'd us, One is, that we frequently peruse and read the Holy Scripture; that we employ ourselves in Searching the sacred Volumes; and meditate on the Subject and Contents of them. My Text is an express Command to this Purpose; We are to *search the Scriptures, because in them we think we have eternal Life*. St Paul accounted it an Happiness in his beloved Timothy, that *from a Child he had known the holy Scriptures*; And the very same St Paul commends the Bereans, because they *search'd the Scriptures whether Things were so as the Apostles taught them*. Hence it appearing,

pearing, that it is our Duty to read these Books, let us enquire into the Reason and Foundation of this Command.

Did God lay this Injunction on us, merely for the Exercise of Reading; or was this done, with a View to our Understanding these Writings? If He did it for the former End, i. e. for the bare Exercise of Reading, we might, to as good purpose, read any other Book; and any Composition, not inspir'd by the Holy Ghost, would have answer'd all that God propos'd in this Volume. But, if the End and Design of his commanding us to read these Scriptures, be, our Understanding their Sense, our apprehending the Contents of them, and our forming our Lives according to their Rules and Directions, then, no Question, the Scriptures must be obvious to our Understanding; we must be able to apprehend them; and the Rules they contain must be intelligible: Otherwise, He hath commanded us to search in vain; and hath put us upon a Labour, which must prove fruitless and unsuccessful. To speak Truth, It is altogether inconsistent with the Honour of God, to suggest, that He should injoin us to read the Scripture, were not our Duty clearly to be learnt from it, or lay on us a Task, fromwhence no Benefit could arise.

Fourthly, a more certain Argument of the Clearness of Holy Scripture, in all the Necel-
saries

farries to Salvation, may be drawn from the Evidence and Testimony of Scripture itself. For The Old Testament, *Moses* fully asserted it, *Deut. 30. 11. The Word*, saith he, (speaking, as appears from v. 16th, of the whole Law he had deliver'd,) *which I command thee this Day, is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off; It is not in Heaven, neither beyond the Sea; but it is very nigh unto thee, even in thy Mouth and in thy Heart, that thou mayst do it.* Agreeably hereto, Holy *David* styles the Word of God, *a Lamp unto his Feet, and a Light unto his Paths*: and, in the 19th Psalm, v. 7, 8. he declares, that *the Testimony of God is sure, and giveth Wisdom unto the Simple; the Commandment of the Lord is pure, and giveth Light unto the Eyes.* These are unanswerable Evidences of the Perspicuity of The Old Testament.

And we have equal Assurances, that the Gospel carrys with it the same Clearness. St *Paul* avowedly maintains, (2. Cor. 4. 3.) that *if the Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom the God of this World hath blinded the Minds of them who believe not, lest the Light of the glorious Gospel of Christ should shine unto them*: Of which Words, This alone is the obvious Interpretation; "that, if the Doctrines
"of the Gospel be hidden, or seem obscure to
"any Person, this Effect is not to be charg'd
"on the Scriptures themselves; on the Matter
"they

"they contain; or the Manner in which it is
 "deliver'd, but only, on the Unfitness and In-
 "capacity of some Men to receive these Do-
 "ctrines: And this Unfitness is owing to their
 "worldly Affections; to their being blinded
 "by carnal Views; and their having given up
 "their Minds to the God of this World. The
 "Light itself is obscure, to such as wilfully
 "shut their Eyes; and the Sun at Noon-day
 "hath no Brightness, if the Clouds conceal
 "him from our Sight."

Lastly, so far are the Scriptures from being
 obscure, in the necessary Articles, that it hath,
 by some Persons, been thought a Ground of
 Objection, that the Discourses and Precepts
 of our Saviour are so very plain and simple;
 that they are without the Ornaments of
 Speech, that they have no Oratory to please
 a polite Taste; and seem calculated for the
 Vulgar only. This, as to the moral Precepts
 of The New Testament, is, in a great Mea-
 sure, true; and of Consequence, a sufficient
 Proof of the Clearness of Scripture.

But, on the other Hand, if we consider this
 Matter rightly, we shall find, that there are
 very good Reasons, why our Saviour should
 deliver his Doctrines in this plain, simple, and
 unaffected Style, and not adorn them with
 the Flights of Oratory.

For, these Rules being given us as a Guide
 of

of our moral Actions, ought to be deliver'd in the plainest Manner that could be devis'd, that we might be the less liable to misrepresent or mistake them. In the Sermon, for Instance, on the Mount, which is contain'd in the *fifth, sixth, and seventh* Chapters of *St Matthew*, our Saviour was discoursing to a Multitude, consisting of unlearn'd Persons; and therefore, ought to suit his Discourse to their Judgments and Capacities. Beside this, the Precepts, then deliver'd, being afterwards to be put in Writing, and so transmitted to Posterity, as a Body of Laws whereby to form Men's Lives, it became requisite, that they should be penn'd in the plainest Manner; because all Laws whatsoever ought to be so express'd.

The Statute Laws of our Kingdom, or Acts enacted by the Legislature, are always conceiv'd in the most obvious and easy Expressions, and void of all the Ornaments of Speech, for This Reason, that they may most easily be understood, and least liable to be mistaken. Eloquence is allowable, and very justly employ'd for the procuring such Laws; but the Laws themselves must be conceiv'd in the plainest and easiest Language; otherwise, they will lose their End by their Obscurity and Intricacy.

This was the Reason that our Saviour's Discourses run in this plain Style. He spoke with
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the Authority of a Legislator; and therefore, with the same Simplicity. It was beneath him to make use of artful Insinuations, when the inward Weight of his Laws was sufficient. An affected Eloquence is improper and unseasonable, in dictating the general Rules of Life. This he left to be made use of by other succeeding Teachers; who have no other way to supply the Want of Power and Force to persuade, than the having Recourse to human Arts of Oratory.

I am now, in the Third Place, to return Answers to the principal Arguments, which have been advanc'd, and from which the Obscurity of Scripture hath been urg'd and infer'd.

And here, the Answer which the *Eunuch* gave to *Philip*, (*Acts* 8. 31.) hath been made use of as a Proof, that the Scriptures are so obscure, that there is an absolute Necessity of a living and infallible Interpreter in the Church on Earth. *Philip* was order'd to draw near his Chariot; and found the *Eunuch* reading a Passage of the Prophecy of *Isaiab*. The Providence of God had so dispos'd it, that the *Eunuch* had fallen on a part of that Prophecy, (*Ch.* 53.) in which the Sufferings and Death of the *Messiah* were describ'd and foretold; and which, very fitly presented an Occasion to *Philip*, to begin his preaching to him *Christ crucified*. *Philip* demands, *Understandest Thou*

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Thou what thou readeſt? The Eunuch answer'd,
How can I, except ſome Man ſhould guide me?
Thus the Matter really ſtood: and from theſe laſt Words it hath been inferr'd, that the Scriptures are obſcure, and that a Guide is requiſite to our underſtanding them.

But, in Answer to this; Doth it follow, that, becauſe this *Eunuch*, (a Perſon of a very diſtant Nation, merely a Proſelyte to *Judaism*, and therefore very little acquainted with the *Jewiſh* Scriptures; a Novice in their Religion, and a Stranger perhaps to their very Expectation of a *Meſſiah*) could not readily expound a difficult and obſcure Propheſy, that therefore *they*, at this Time, are equally dark, and unintelligible by us? I have already, in this Diſcourſe, produc'd ſome Reaſons, why all Propheſies muſt neceſſarily be obſcure, 'till the Time of their Accompliſhment: And, that this Propheſy was ſo to this *Eunuch*, is no more an Argument to prove the Obſcurity of Scripture in general, than it would be to infer, that all Words whatſoever are obſcure and doubtful, becauſe Children cannot be brought to read them, without the Directions of an Inſtructor.

Not to take Notice farther, in Answer to this Objection, That our Underſtanding all Propheſies, is not abſolutely neceſſary to our Salvation; and therefore, this Inſtance doth
not

not come up to the Point in Question.

It hath farther been objected, That Holy David himself, (who had the Honour to be a Prophet, and therefore, may be suppos'd to have had a large Share of Divine Knowledge,) yet frequently, and particularly in the *Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm*, begs God to open his Eyes, that he might see the wondrous Things of his Law; and to give him Understanding, that he might know his Testimonies.

To this we return, That the Subject of David's Prayer, in these and the like Passages, was, not that God would give him a Knowledge of what should be necessary to his Salvation, — or, that the Law of God was so obscure to him, that he could not find his Duty in it; (for as to That Part of Divine Knowledge, he very often boasts of his extensive Perfection; — *I have more Understanding*, says he, *than my Teachers*; — *I am wiser than the Aged*; — *Thro' thy Precepts I get Understanding*;) But, what he desires in these Petitions, is, that God would give him a farther Insight into the Secrets of his Providence; would clear up to him his seemingly irregular Dispensations; and, in particular, That Part of them, which he so often declares to have shock'd and puzzl'd him; viz. Why it happens, that the Righteous are forsaken, while the Wicked thrive and prosper; that the former

are oppress'd, while the latter flourish like a green Bay-Tree. These were the Subjects, of which *David* desired a farther Knowledge.

But, as this Desire was the Result of a blameable Curiosity, so, it can be no Objection to the Clearness of Scripture. These Books were design'd, to point out to us the Way of Salvation; and to the attaining that End, they are abundantly perspicuous. A farther Inquisitiveness doth no way become us; For we are not buisily to pry into those Secrets, which God hath reserv'd to himself.

Farther still, it hath been objected, That if the Scriptures be so clear and intelligible to us, How comes it to pass, that there are among *Protestants* so many Divisions, and such a Variety of Perswasions? Why do our Expounders of Scripture so often differ from, and even contradict each other? And, what Necessity is there for such a Multitude of Comments on the Scripture, if the Sense of it be so obvious, as *Protestants* represent it?

We answer, That the Divisions among *Protestants*, is a very strange Objection from those of the Church of *Rome*; amongst whom, there are Dissentions no less in Number, nor less warmly kept up; and those too, which (notwithstanding the pretended Infallibility of the *Papal Chair*) none of their *Popes* have had the Courage to determine.

But, to answer this more fully; it must be observ'd, that the Dissentions among *Protestants*, and the different Interpretations which their Writers have given of some Texts of Scripture, are not such as relate to any of the Necessaries to Salvation; — do not concern Points of Faith; — are not about the Fundamentals of Religion, (for in these, *Protestants* of all Denominations agree as to the Main;) But, the Points in Debate, are only about Matters which relate to Discipline; to Rites and Ceremonies in Worship; to Things in their own Nature indifferent; and, without the Knowledge or Practice of which, it is, on all Sides confess'd, that Salvation may be attain'd.

Having thus, from many Considerations, evinc'd the Clearness of Holy Scripture, in all the necessary Articles, both of Faith and Manners; and withall, shewn the Weakness of those Pretensions, on which the opposite Doctrine hath been maintain'd; I come now, in the Fourth and Last Place, to apply these several Heads to a few practical Uses; such as naturally result from the Subject I have handl'd.

First then, the Subject Matter of the Holy Scripture, and the Manner in which it is treated, being (as hath been shewn) obvious, easy and intelligible, Nothing will be necessary for the full understanding it, but a few

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Qualifications on our Part; and these are chiefly, an honest and upright Intention; a sincere Desire of being benefited; and an impartial Search and Enquiry after Truth.

Simplicity and Integrity of Heart, are what God is pleas'd with at all Times; but more especially so, when we are drawing near to him, and examining his Laws. Modesty, Wariness, and Humility, are at these Times, the proper Qualities to be exerted: And if any Thing occurs, which may seem dark and mysterious, we are to search with Singleness of Heart; not to be hasty and decisive, but to wait with Patience; 'till upon our continu'd Application, God shall reveal it to us.

If, with these Qualifications; with a perfect Heart, and a willing Mind; with an honest Design of being instructed in the Principles of Religion; and, in consequence of that Instruction, of serving God to the utmost of our Power, we apply ourselves to the Study of these Doctrines, we have then for our Encouragement, an actual Promise from God, the Assurance of his own Word for it, that *we shall know of the Doctrine* (at least as far as is necessary for us to know,) both what it is, and *whether it be of God*.

Secondly, and to have done; Before we complain of the Obscurity of Scripture, let us take Care, duly to practise those Parts of it,

which are not obscure. Nothing can be more unreasonable, than, for Men to object to the Scripture a Want of Clearness, who at the same Time, practise none of those Duties there recommended, which are confessedly clear and obvious.

It is, in Truth, against the plain Parts of Scripture that the Quarrel is laid; and whatever Pretensions Men may raise, whereon to charge the Word of God with Obscurity, yet it is but too true, that the real Ground of it is, that there are too many clear Texts, which witness against their Practices.

If the Scriptures be obscure, the proper Inference we should make, is, that greater Application is necessary in order to discover their Sense; that we ought to study them more industriously; and to join with Holy David in his Petition, with which I conclude, *Teach me, O Lord, the Way of thy Statutes, and I shall keep it unto the End.*



SERMON

SERMON VI.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

HAVING, in several preceding Discourses founded on this Text, evinc'd the great and fundamental Doctrines relating to the Scriptures, viz. their Divine Original and Authority; their Perfection and Sufficiency in all the Necessaries to Salvation; and their Clearness and Plainness in all those necessary Articles, whether of Faith or Manners; — I propose, at present, to lay before You the Truth and Evidence of a Proposition, (which is indeed virtually included in these Premises, and is none other than a necessary Corollary from them,) namely, That in all controverted Points of Religion, and in all Doubts arising to us therein, we are to take the Scriptures for our Guide; and to form our Judgments, in those Articles which are the Subjects of Disputes and Controversies, solely upon the Directions we meet with in those Writings.

This Truth, tho', as I said, it be no more than the necessary Consequence of what hath been already prov'd, (the Infallibility, the Perfection, and the Clearness of Scripture;) yet, since it is so very highly useful, and so important, towards settling and confirming our Opinions in all doubtful Cases, it will be worth our while to treat of it at large, and to establish it by good Proofs.

It having pleas'd The Almighty to permit Differences in Opinions to arise in his Church; to suffer Men to dissent from each other in certain Doctrines; and, by these Means, the Peace of Christianity to be disturb'd by Schisms and Divisions; in this fluctuating and uncertain State, it is of great Expediency to the Satisfaction of every private Man, and towards the settling our Tenets and Judgments, to have a sure and unerring Guide to lead us into all Truth.

Our State would otherwise be very deplorable: We might continue in perpetual Doubts at least, if not in certain Mistakes. And as the Labyrinths and Mazes of Error are almost infinite, so we might continually run from one Fallhood to another. We have a native, inherent, and very urgent Desire to enquire after Truth. And as no Truths are more valuable than those of Religion, or of nearer Concernment and Weight, — so, wherever we find

find a Guide to them, the greater is our Happiness, and the more firm our Peace of Mind.

The Usefulness and Expediency of such an infallible Guide in Controversy, is too apparent, not to be own'd and acknowledg'd by all Parties of Christians: And therefore, in this Respect, there is an universal Agreement and Concurrence. But, where to find this Guide; where to fix this Infallibility; and where this supreme Judicature is to be met with, hath been the Subject of all the Debates relating to this Matter.

Some have averr'd, that *Christ* hath appointed upon Earth, a living and infallible Judge of all Controversies, in the Person of The Bishop of *Rome*, and his Successors in that See. Others assert, that the supreme Power of deciding Differences in Religion, is vested in the respective Governours of each particular and National Church; and, that every Man's Conscience is obliged to submit itself, to what his Superiors in the Church think fit to determine for Truth. A third Sort declare, that a Power of judging and determining disputed Points, is only lodg'd in the *Church-universal*, or the whole Body of Christians; and therefore, that the whole *Catholick Church*, or at least it's Representative, (a free and general Council, consisting of Bishops and other Members of every particular Part of it,) is the only legal Judge

and Arbitrator of Differences. A fourth Assertion hath been, that the surest and shortest Method of deciding all Controversies, is, to have Recourse to the Writings of the first and earliest *Christians*; to look into the Doctrines of the most *primitive Church*, as they are transmitted to us in the Books of those whom we call the *Fathers*; and to take their Decisions, as being more authentick than those of the later Ages, and *prior* to that Corruption and Degeneracy in Religion, which succeeding Times introduc'd into the Church. The Foundation of each of these several Pretensions, shall be enquir'd into in the Sequel of this Discourse; in which I propose to shew, that all, and every of these, have no just Right to be our absolute Guide in Controversy, but, that the Scripture only is to be relyed on in these Cases.

But here, when we assert, that the Scripture alone is the adequate Judge of Controversy, and the sole Guide therein, it must all along be remember'd, that we understand this only of Points of Doctrine, and in Matters of Faith; only of Things which are requir'd to be believ'd, and which Men are to assent to, as necessary to Salvation. For, as to other Matters in Religion, — those which are not Fundamental, — those which are extrinsecal and foreign to Faith, — those which relate to

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Discipline, to Rites and Ceremonies in Worship; and all other Particulars, which are of an indifferent Nature, (but about which great and lasting Differences have arisen,) These fall, properly, within the Power of the Presidents and Governours of each National Church, to be by them settl'd, pursuant to the general Directions of Scripture, according to Decency and Order, and as will best promote the Honour of God's Service, and the Edification of his Church.

In these indifferent Things, the Scripture hath prescrib'd no Rule and Direction, other than in general Terms. And indeed, the different Customs of different Nations, with respect to Decency and Order, have render'd it altogether impossible, that a fix'd and standing Rule should be prescrib'd, as of universal Use, and to extend to all Kingdoms. These Things therefore, must, necessarily, be left to the Care and Institution of the Governours of each respective Church: They are the Objects of Their Power; and Their Injunctions, of this Kind, have the clearest Title to our Obedience.

For, in Truth, if we deny this Power to the Church, we take from her all Kind of Power whatsoever; and her Authority will, upon this Supposition, extend to Nothing at all; Because, what is not indifferent in it's Nature, must

must be already determin'd by some superior Authority; and to such, it is very evident, her Authority cannot extend: But, whatever is left undetermin'd by any superior Authority, must, consequently, be the Object of her Power; and in all such Determinations, she must have a Right to our Obedience.

When therefore, (as in the present Discourse,) we are enquiring for the true Guide and Director in Controversy, we desire to be understood to mean it, only in controverted Points, or Disputable Doctrines; only in such Articles, as are thought necessary to be believ'd; and not at all in indifferent Things; in the Externals of Religion; or in Matters of Discipline or Order; These properly belonging to another Tribunal, and to the Cognizance and Jurisdiction of the Governours of the respective Churches.

Farther, let it be remember'd, that, in this our Enquiry after a Guide in controverted Points of Faith, and a sure Rule whereby to determine our Assent, we do not exclude all inferior, subordinate, and secondary Directions, from being of some Use and Benefit, in the forming our Judgments: For, we very readily acknowledge, that all, or most of the before-mention'd Guides, (the Authority of each particular and National Church, — the Decisions of a general Council, — and the Determinations

minations of the eldest Writers of *Christianity*;) are all of singular Use and Benefit to us; and, in their respective Ways, afford us great Advantages.

But, the Guide, which is the Subject of our present Search, is, the supreme and ultimate Guide; One, which is suppos'd to be unerring; One, from which there lies no farther Appeal; and, to whose Decisions we are implicitly and absolutely to submit.

And altho' we maintain, that the Scriptures alone are to be receiv'd as this supreme and ultimate Judge, yet we deny not, but that these others are, and may be, very beneficial to us, as secondary, ministerial, and subservient Helps and Assistances, in our Searching the genuine Sense of Scripture; and upon that Account, as well as their Antiquity and Authority, may challenge a good Degree of Esteem and Deference. But, they are not therefore, to be put on a Level with the written Word of God; or allow'd to be competent and infallible Guides in disputed Points of Faith; but rather, to be us'd as subaltern Helps, and secondary Instruments, in resolving Doubts.

In the farther handling this Subject, I shall observe the following Method.

First, I shall shew the Weakness of those Pretensions, upon which it hath been asserted, either

either, that The Bishops of *Rome*, or the Authority of any National Church, or of a general Council, or of the ancient Writers of the Christian Church, are the supreme and ultimate Guides in Controversies of Faith.

Secondly, I shall evince, by many Arguments, that The Scripture only is that supreme Guide.

Lastly, I shall make some Observations, on the Way and Method of our Interpreting Scripture, so as that it may answer the End of it's being this Guide.

First then, I am to shew the Weakness of those Pretensions, upon which it hath been asserted, either that The Bishops of *Rome*, or the Authority of any National Church, or of a general Council, or of the ancient Writers of the Christian Church, are the supreme and ultimate Guides in Controversies of Faith.

To begin with the Pretensions of the *First* of these, The Bishops of *Rome*. Had The Almighty repos'd that Power and Trust in that See, it seems very strange, that He should give no Directions concerning it in Scripture; that He should not afford the least Hint of it; nor even, by the most distant Intimation, signify his Pleasure, that in all doubtful Cases we should be determin'd by the Judgment of The Bishop of *Rome*. A Claim of this high Nature ought to be made out very clearly; and

at least some authentick Proof of it be drawn from the Word of God. Had this great Privilege truly belong'd to that See, it is surprizing that *St Paul*, in all that long Epistle which he wrote to the *Romans*, should not once mention or hint at it. *St Peter*, who is affirm'd to have been Bishop of *Rome* himself, is the Author of Two Epistles: But, in neither of them is there the least Intimation of this Authority. These were very proper Persons, and these their Epistles were as fit Places, to have recorded this great Privilege of *Rome*, and to put it past Doubt in any succeeding Ages. But, as this is not done, so it is a strong Prejudice against this Claim, and renders it precarious.

But farther; Not only the Scripture, but also all Antiquity, is silent in this Matter. There is not the least Ground to support this Claim, in any of the Primitive Writers now extant; but rather, a great deal transmitted to us, which plainly demonstrates the direct contrary. We are certain, from the eldest History of the Church, that, in Controversies which then arose, The Bishops of *Rome*, were so far from being look'd on as the infallible Guides of Men's Consciences, that very great Opposition was made to their Judgments, by the several Bishops of other Churches.

Thus, in that very early Dispute, concerning
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the Day on which The *Easter-Festival* should be observ'd, the Eastern Churches did unanimously oppose themselves to the Decree of The Bishop of *Rome*; and continu'd to follow their own Sentiments. Thus again, in the next Century, when a Dispute arose concerning the Validity of Baptism confer'd by Heretics, — and whether Persons, so baptiz'd, should be admitted into the Church without Rebaptization, — all the Churches of *Africa*, and a great Part of those of the East, oppos'd the Determination of the then Bishop of *Rome*; and observ'd That Practice, which to them seem'd most reasonable.

In all these Debates, the other Bishops treated those of *Rome* as their Brethren, and Equals; but not as their Masters, or infallible Guides. They knew of no such Authority, as hath been since claim'd and exercis'd; but oppos'd the Text of Scripture, and the general Practice of the Church, to the unwarrantable Encroachments on their Rights and Liberties. And thus Things stood thro' the first Ages of *Christianity*; tho' Length of Time, and the succeeding Artifices, contributed to make that Claim more prosperous and successful.

Lastly; It is sufficient to shew the Vanity of this Pretence, if we reflect, that, so far are The Bishops of *Rome* from being the supreme
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Guides in Controversy, or capable of leading Men into all Truth, that even themselves have frequently fallen into the greatest and most dangerous Errors. And, that Person is evidently a very incompetent Guide to others, who is, himself, equally subject to Mistakes.

The Decrees of the Bishops of *Rome*, have, in some Cases, been contrary to each other; and, at such Times, One of them must necessarily have been wrong. One of their Bishops, is, by themselves, confess'd to have renounc'd *Christianity* in a Time of Persecution, and to have preserv'd his Life, by sacrificing to Idols. Another, subscrib'd to the Doctrines and Tenets of *Arius*, and shamefully condemn'd the oppress'd *Athanasius*. Another, is well known to have favour'd the Cause and Errors of *Montanus*; as a Successor of his, did those of *Pelagius*. Another, was condemn'd and depos'd in a general Council, as being a profess'd *Monothelite*: And it is no longer since, than the Close of the very last Century, that a *Pope*, in Person, was examin'd by a Court of Inquisition at *Rome*, as being suspected to have gone into the Errors of the *Quietists*. With what Appearance of Reason then, — With what Face, can it be pretended, that the Determinations at *Rome* are infallible, and their Bishops sufficient Guides in Controversies of Faith, who have themselves fallen from the Faith, and been the

the Patrons of the most destructive Errors. To these may be apply'd, what our Saviour pronounc'd of the Jewish Doctors in his Days, *If the blind lead the blind, both must fall into the Ditch.*

Nor, Secondly, are the Determinations of any particular or National Church, to be receiv'd, as the supreme Guide in controverted Points of Faith.

The Governors of a particular Church, tho' they have, (as I before observ'd,) a Right to our Obedience in Things indifferent, and in which the Scriptures have made no Determinations, yet cannot claim the same Power in Matters of Doctrine: For, in these, they are, with the rest of Mankind, liable to Error, and not exempted from Mistakes. The Decisions which they make, must be agreeable to the Tenor of Scripture; otherwise, they are of no Weight or Authority over Men's Consciences. As these Men have no Pretensions to Infallibility, and are confessedly under no immediate, or more-than-common Influences of God's Holy Spirit, so, they cannot make any absolute and authoritative Determination.

The Church of the Jews was the only Church of God, 'till the Appearance of our Saviour; and had as good and just Pretensions to an absolute Authority in Matters of Faith,

as any National and particular Church hath since laid Claim to. But we see, that in the most momentous Affair which ever came before them, or indeed any other Assembly of Church-Governours, namely, the Pretensions of *Jesus of Nazareth* to be the true and promis'd *Messiah*, they miserably err'd, and rejected *the Christ*.

Our Saviour, it is evident, knew of no such Authority, in that National Church, to be the supreme Guide in Controversy. He bid his Disciples *beware* of her Doctrines; He charg'd that Church with *having made the Commands of God of none Effect*; and call'd her Governours *a Generation of Vipers, and Blind Leaders of the blind*. These are plain Evidences, that National Churches may err; that their Decisions are not to be receiv'd implicitly; and have no just Title to being the supreme Rule of Faith.

Had it been true, that any particular Church can decide authoritatively, no One *Jew* whatsoever could (without a great Sin,) have come into the Belief of our Saviour, and the Acknowledgment of his being *the Christ*; because, the whole Government of the *Jewish* Church had declar'd against him; He was disown'd and rejected by the chief Priests and Elders; was traduc'd as a Magician and Impostor; and had the Authority of the Church

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clearly against him. If Matters of this Consequence were to be determin'd only by the Authority of the Church, the Argument which was urg'd against him by some of his Enemies, [*Have any of the Rulers or of the Pharisees believ'd?*] was such a one, as could admit no Answer; and He must have been content to have no Profelytes, 'till the High Priest, and the Governours of that Church had receiv'd and acknowledg'd him.

On the contrary, his chusing to be first receiv'd by the People, and not by the Recommendation of the Governours of the Church, seems to speak, as if He had an Intention for ever to silence and beat down the least Claim, that any Church should make to such an absolute Authority over her Sons in Matters of Faith.

And it was probably owing to this mistaken, tho' then prevailing Doctrine amongst the *Jewish* People, that the *Gentile* World came so readily into the Acknowledgment of *The Messiah*, and *Christianity* found so easy a Reception amongst *Heathens*, whilst the *Jewish* Church (notwithstanding the Clearness of their Prophecies concerning *Christ*, and their exact Accomplishment in *Jesus of Nazareth*), continued still in Infidelity. For, the Body of the *Jewish* People, being possess'd with this Notion of a blind Obedience to their Governours

vernours in Matters of Faith, rejected *The Messiah*, for no other Reason, than that their Governours had done so; whereas the *Gentile* World, having no Notion of such an implicit Obedience to Authority, but relying upon their private Judgments, were more easily induc'd to embrace the *Christian* Faith, and to close with a Doctrine, which came so strongly recommended to their Reason.

From all which it appears, that, forasmuch as the Presidents of a Church are Men fallible, and obnoxious to Errors, and some such Churches have actually err'd in Matters of the greatest Consequence, the Decrees of such Churches cannot justly be esteem'd the supreme Guide in Controversy, nor a certain Rule for the Discovery of Faith.

Nor, Thirdly, are the Decrees and Decisions of any General Council, and the most numerous Assemblies of the Faithful, to be esteem'd the ultimate Directors in Controversies of Faith, or the supreme Judge, from which lies no farther Appeal. For, such Councils consisting only of single Men, each of which, singly taken, is subject to Error, must of Consequence be liable to the same Possibility of Erring. Numbers, how great soever, cannot confer Infallibility; and a collective Body is, questionless, incident to the same Weakness, to which every single Member of it is expos'd.

We have Instances, in Ecclesiastical History, of some Councils, in which the Numbers of Assessors have been very great and considerable; and yet, which have establish'd Doctrines contrary to the Faith, and which have been judg'd to be damnable Heresies.

Arianism itself hath been adjudg'd to be true Doctrine in no less than two Councils, where the Numbers of Fathers have been as great, as they have ever been in any Council that hath condemn'd that Doctrine. The Determinations which have been given in such Assemblies, being directly opposite and contradictory to each other, it must follow, that at least one Side hath err'd; and consequently, that there can be no absolute Security from embracing Error, in those Men, who regard such Determinations, as an ultimate and authoritative Rule of their Faith.

With the greatest Reason therefore doth our Holy Mother, The Church of *England*, declare in her *Twenty First Article of Religion*, that *General Councils may err, and sometimes have err'd; wherefore Things ordain'd by them, as necessary to Salvation, have neither Strength, nor Authority, unless it may be declar'd, that they be taken out of the Holy Scripture.*

Nor, Lastly, are the remaining Writings of the *First Christians*, (commonly call'd the *Fathers*;) a sufficient Guide in Matters of Faith,

or the supreme Judge in religious Controversies. A great Deference and Esteem is due to those holy, pious and learned Patrons of *Christianity*; and we are much indebted to their Memories, both for these their excellent Writings, and their eminent Exemplariness of Life and Manners. Their Antiquity hath made them venerable; and as they liv'd nearer to the Fountain of Truth, so we may rationally suppose them to have been well acquainted with it. But, after all, they were but Men, subject to like Infirmities with other Writers; and in their Books, which are still extant, it must be own'd, there are many Errors, and Slips scarce pardonable.

The Volumes of the first and purest Ages, which have reach'd our Hands, it is certain are very few, in comparison with what have been lost; and those few which we have, have suffer'd very much by the Hands they have pass'd through, and been corrupted, alter'd, and made to speak such Things as their Authors never thought of.

Beside all this, it is very true, that the Writings of the Fathers which still remain, are, for the most part, written against those who then chiefly oppos'd them, The *Jews* and *Gentiles*. They wrote for the Establishment of the *Christian* Religion in general; for the Conversion of Unbelievers; and for their own Justification

tion against the Slanders thrown on them. By these Means it hath come to pass, that, in relation to most of the great Controversies, which have for the last Ages exercis'd the Pens of *Christians*, there is scarce any Thing to be found among the Writings of the Fathers. These modern Disputes chiefly relate to Points not then thought of, nor question'd; and upon which the Ancients are, (for that very Reason,) either almost wholly silent, — or, if any Thing hath escap'd them upon such Subjects, it is very brief; it fell from them occasionally, and by the By, as not being the profess'd Subject, upon which they were writing.

In a few Words; In all disputed Matters of Faith, and upon every Article of it, which hath been call'd in Question, every Person, who desires Satisfaction, would be glad to know, What the First *Christians* thought of those Points; How they believ'd; and What was the Doctrine of the most ancient Church. There will always, amongst impartial Judges, be a great Deference paid to the ancient *Christians*. They liv'd nearer the Fountain-head; and therefore receiv'd the Truth in it's greatest Purity. Corruptions in Religion are the Effects of Length of Time; and are not either easily, or soon introduc'd. For these Reasons, it being very useful in all Disputes to know, What was the Faith and Doctrine of the eldest Ages of

of *Christianity*; the surest and most successful Way to come at that Knowledge, is, to search the Writings of the Primitive Fathers; because, they liv'd in those very Times, whose Tenets we are enquiring after; and therefore, are the most sufficient and competent Witnesses of what those Ages believ'd. They cannot be mistaken in such plain Matters of Fact, as what themselves and their Fellow *Christians* believ'd; and they could not be ignorant of what was in their own Days look'd on as sound and Catholick, or what was judg'd false Doctrine.

The true Use therefore of the Writings of the Fathers, is, to vouch them as Historians of what the Primitive Church believ'd, (and That, as I said, is a Consideration, which will ever have great Weight with sober and impartial Men;) but not to rely on them, as supreme Guides in Controversy, or make them the absolute Judges of Faith, from whom lies no farther Appeal.

Having thus evinc'd my First Proposition, and shewn the Weakness of those Pretensions, upon which it hath been asserted, Either that The Bishops of *Rome*, — the Authority of any *National Church*, — the Determinations of a *General Council*, or, the ancientest Writers of the *Christian Church*, are the supreme and ultimate Guides in Controversies of Faith; I am

now, in the Second Place to shew, by many Arguments, that the Scripture only is that supreme Guide.

The Truth of this Proposition will clearly appear, when we consider, that all the Properties and Qualifications, which are requisite to such a supreme and authoritative Guide, are visibly to be found in the Books of the Holy Scripture, and are not to be met with any where else.

The Qualifications requisite to a supreme Guide, and to one, by whose Judgment we are finally to be determin'd, are, that such a Guide be infallible; that he be perfect and compleat, and able to instruct us in the Truth we search after; and, Lastly, that he be clear and obvious in the Determination which he gives. Where all these Qualifications concur, there we may safely set up our Rest, and depend upon our Guide; But, where Either of these Qualifications is not found, the Want of it necessarily renders that Guide insufficient.

For, if he be not infallible himself, but liable to be deceiv'd and mistaken, I can then have no Certainty but the Guide himself may err; and so be the Occasion of leading me likewise into Error. If he be not perfect and compleat, and able to instruct me in the Truth I search after; it is possible that his Ignorance may produce the like in me. And if he be not

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clear and obvious in his Determinations; if his Rules are not to be understood, but obscure, doubtful, and perplex'd; it is great Chance, but I may err by mistaking his Sense. Infallibility therefore; a compleat and perfect Knowledge of all Truth; and a Clearness, Obviousness, and Perspicuity in determining, being (for the Reasons before given —) essentially requisite to a supreme and ultimate Guide, it is very easy to observe, that as all these Qualifications do not meet and concur in any One of the other, and before-mention'd Guides, so they do all belong to the Holy Scriptures, and center there.

Thus, as to their Infallibility, they are a Revelation from the Supreme God, the God of all Knowledge and Perfection, a Being that can neither be deceiv'd, nor deceive us. They were inspir'd by The Spirit of Truth, and compos'd at the Suggestion of The Holy Ghost, whose infinite Perfections have set him above the Possibility of erring. Human Compositions indeed, thro' the Ignorance of the Authors in those Matters which are the Subjects of their Writings, or thro' their own evil Intention of deceiving and imposing on their Readers, may be the Parents of Mistake and Delusion. But neither of these Sources of Error can be imputed to The Holy Spirit, the Author of these Books; his unbounded Knowledge

ledge being a Bar to the former, and his Veracity and Holiness a Guard against the latter.

As to the Perfection of this Rule, and it's Sufficiency to instruct us on all Emergencies, it is unquestionable, that it contains all Things necessary to be believ'd, or practis'd, in order to Salvation, and is a compleat Rule both of Faith, and Manners. St Paul affirms of them all in general, *That they are able to make us wise unto Salvation*; and, in particular, *that they are profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness, that the Man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnish'd unto all good Works*: 2 Tim. 3. 15, 16, 17. And this was affirm'd by this Apostle, at a Time, when a great Part of the New Testament was not as yet written: Many of his own Epistles were not then compos'd: Many of the other Books were of a later Date: And, we are certain, that the Gospel of St John was penn'd last of the whole Number. If then the few Books which were then compos'd, were of themselves a sufficient Rule, and *able to make Men wise unto Salvation*, much greater is the united Light which flows from them all; and with greater Certainty can they produce that Effect, when taken jointly and collectively.

Lastly, as to the Clearness of this Guide, we are assur'd of The Old Testament, that it is *a Lamp unto our Feet, and a Light unto our Paths*;

Paths; that it is sure, and giveth Wisdom unto the simple; that it is pure, and giveth Light unto the eyes: And of the New Testament St Paul expressly declares, that if the Gospel be hid, it is hid unto them that are lost; in whom The God of this World hath blinded the Eyes of them who believe not, lest the Light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine unto them. The obvious Sense of which Words, is, that if the Doctrines of the Gospel are hid, or seem obscure to any Person, this Effect is to be charg'd, Not on the Scriptures themselves, Not on the Matter which they contain, nor on the Manner in which they are deliver'd, but solely on the Unfitness and Incapacity of some Men to receive them; and this their Unfitness is owing to their worldly Affections, their being blinded by carnal Views, and their having given up their Minds to the God of this World.

Thus, these three Qualifications requisite to constitute a supreme and authoritative Guide in controverted Matters of Faith, being to be found in the Scripture, and not in any other pretended Guide, it is of Consequence evident, that the Scripture, and the Scripture only is to be rely'd on, as a Guide in all such controverted Points.

Lastly, and to close this Head; That the Scripture alone is to be appeal'd to in all Mat-
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ters of Faith, is evident from the Practice of our Saviour, and his Apostles after him.

From all the Conduct of *Christ* it appears, that He knew of no other Authority which is implicitly to be follow'd, but the reveal'd Word of God. In all Matters of Consequence, He refer'd his Hearers to the Dictates of Scripture, as the only safe Rule by which to form their Judgments. In his Discourses and Reasonings with The *Jews* upon the Subject of his being *The Messiah*, He builds nothing upon any other Authority; but sends them to *Moses and the Prophets* for their Conviction and Satisfaction, that He was *The Christ*. *Search the Scriptures* (said He,) *for they are they which testify of me.* In these his Words there is a plain Appeal to that Rule: And as those Scriptures, (which were full Evidences of his being *The Messiah*), should be found to testify for, or against him, they were to form their Judgments concerning his Pretensions.

His Apostles follow'd the same Example. St Paul tells the *Corinthians*, that *he had no Dominion over their Faith*; and that *he indeed had planted them, and Apollos had water'd them; but that neither he that planteth, nor he that watereth is any Thing.* The same Apostle approves and commends it in the *Bereans*, that they took Nothing upon Trust, or mere human Authority, but daily search'd the *Scriptures*

ptures whether Things were so, as the Apostles had preach'd them. These are Demonstrations, that in the Judgment of our Saviour, and this Great Apostle, the Scriptures only are the supreme Guide, and are ultimately to be recurr'd to in disputed Points of Faith.

Hitherto, I have asserted, (and I hope with some Strength of Reason,) That great Privilege, and Authority, which justly belongs to Scripture, of being the supreme and absolute Guide in Controversies of Faith: a Privilege, to which it hath the only clear and indisputable Title; but which yet it hath been the Endeavour of the whole *Romish* Church (and I wish it could be said of them only) to wrest and take from it. Hitherto they have fail'd of Success; and this Principle remains establish'd, as the Foundation and Support of the whole *Protestant* Faith.

And indeed, so sensible are our Adversaries of the Advantage which this Principle brings to our Cause, that it is for the sake of this chiefly, (namely, that the Scripture may not be allow'd to be the supreme Guide,) that they have charg'd these Books with Want both of Perfection and Clearness. They well know, that if these Charges of Insufficiency and Obscurity in Scripture could satisfactorily be made out, it would follow, that these Books could not be a sufficient Guide in Controversy: And then

then there might be room to set up, either the Bishop of *Rome*, or a *Council*, or the *Authority of the Church*, for such a Guide and Director. But, it being now put beyond Question, that the Scriptures are infallible, — are perfect and clear, these Qualifications, (which are not to be found elsewhere,) entitle them to the being our supreme Guide: And to Them, as our Guide, we always make our Appeal.

But, it being obvious, that Men differ in their Interpretations of this Rule, *the Scripture*; and that, amongst the different Opinions in Religion, Each Side pretends Scripture, and thinks *That* favours and Countenances it, it may be ask'd, What, in this Case, shall a private Person do; and after What manner is such a one to interpret Scripture? Is he to follow his own private Judgment only, and to collect the Sense of Scripture for himself; Or, is he to acquiesce in the Interpretations which have been given by others? Is he to believe only, what he himself understands to be the genuine Meaning of the Scripture; Or, is he to be guided in this Search by the Interpretations of it, which have been made by General Councils, — by the Governours of his own National Church, — or, by the Fathers and eldest Christian Writers? It is for the sake of giving Satisfaction to this important Doubt, that I come now, in the

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Third, and Last Place, to make some brief Observations on the Way and Method of our interpreting Scripture, so as it may answer the End of it's being this supreme Guide.

Here then it must be observ'd, that in our interpreting and searching into the Sense of Scripture, tho' the Expositions, which others have given of it, may be of great Use towards our finding the true and genuine Sense of it, yet such their Interpretations are not to be implicitly receiv'd by us, as their certain Sense wherein we are to acquiesce: For, there are the same Reasons against this, as there were before, against their being the supreme and ultimate Guide. And, for the same Causes for which we rejected the Fathers, the Councils, or any National Church, from being the supreme Guides in Faith, (that is, because they are neither Infallible, nor Clear, nor Perfect,) we must also reject them from being the supreme, and ultimate Interpreters of Scripture.

For, if we are absolutely to receive their Interpretations of Scripture, we do, in effect, make them the supreme Guides; And it is the same Thing in the Event, whether I am to receive a Doctrine barely on their Word, or upon their telling me, that they find it in the Scripture, according to their own Interpretation of Scripture. To constitute any Person the supreme Interpreter of Scripture, and implicitly

PLICITLY to receive such his Interpretations, is apparently the same Thing, as to constitute him the supreme *Guide*: It is to vest the Infalibility *mediately* in the Scripture, but *immediately* in the Interpreter.

Every Man's own impartial and unbiass'd Reason, therefore, is to judge for itself. By the Laws of Reason, as well as of Religion, every *Christian* hath, in Matters of Faith, a native, inherent, and unalienable Right of determining his own Conscience, and of receiving into his Faith, what seems recommended by proper Evidence. God alone, speaking by his written Word, or by his Will, however reveal'd, is the sovereign Arbitrator and Ruler of Men's Faith: And this his supreme Authority He hath never delegated, either to any One Man (his Son only excepted,) or to any Body of Men appointed in his Church.

But, when we recommend Private Judgment, as every Man's Rule for interpreting the Holy Scripture, let us not be misunderstood, or thought to countenance any whimsical, enthusiastical, or ill-grounded Interpretations, which weak, unstable, and heedless Men may make. No; in the judging of the Sense of Scripture, Men are not to interpret at Random, and at all Adventures, but are to attend to certain rational and sober Rules; such as any prudent Man would make Use of in interpreting

preting any Author whatsoever: And which, because they are of universal Benefit to every *Christian*, I shall briefly subjoin.

Scripture then, is to be expounded by Scripture; that is, the more difficult and knotty Parts of it, by those which are more clear and express. Every Writer is the best Key to his own Words; and always drops Expressions at one Place, which will illustrate and explain another.

Farther, The Words of Scripture being in some Places capable of a double Interpretation, — the one literal, the other mystical; it must be a fix'd Rule, never to depart from the literal Sense, unless that Sense be contrary to some other Part of Scripture, or infers a Position which is irrational and absurd. The Reason is clear; because the Holy Ghost cannot contradict himself; nor can he be the Author of any Doctrine, which is truly repugnant to right Reason.

Lastly, To interpret Scripture, as is fitting and becoming us, we are to bring with us an honest Heart, and upright Intentions; to judge without Partiality to any private Opinions, and without any sinister and interested Views; to lay aside all Prejudices; and not to strain and force Passages to comply with our own Sentiments; not to search these Writings with a Confidence in our own Abilities, nor

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with a View to our own Credit, and Thirst of Vain-Glory. These are the Qualifications requisite to our searching the Scriptures; and to those, who thus search, no Doubt but God will fulfill his Promise, in letting them *know of the Doctrine*, both what it is, and *whether it be of God*.



SERMON

SERMON VII.

JOHN V. 39.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them
ye think ye have eternal Life.*

Several momentous Truths in relation to the Subject I have been upon, have been already dispatch'd in my preceding Discourses. I am now to treat of that great practical Duty, which is injoin'd us in the Text, that of searching and examining the Holy Scripture.

The Reasonableness of discharging this Duty, is indeed founded upon, and supported by the foregoing Doctrines, whose Truth we have already evinc'd. For, if these Books are of Divine Original and Authority; if they are inspir'd by The Holy Spirit of God; if they are infallible; if they are perfect and compleat in all the Necessaries to Salvation; and, if they are clear and explicit in their delivering these Necessaries; — then it must follow, that the intrinick Worth and Value of these

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Books should forcibly recommend them to our daily and careful Perusal, and make the Study of them grateful and acceptable to us.

Were they indeed of human Composure; were they the Product of a fallible Hand, — they might, like other Compositions, be the Employment only of our leisure Hours, be made Use of as an Amusement, and divert our Time according to our Temper and Inclination: But their Heavenly Original gives them another Kind of Title to our Esteem. They have God for their Author; and are therefore to be treated with a Reverence suitable to their Original. They contain the perfectest Rules of Wisdom; and therefore ought diligently to be search'd by those, who desire to make Proficiency in Wisdom. And as they propose the surest and most certain Method to Happiness and our supreme Good, (the Desire of which is implanted in our Nature,) so, upon that Account, they recommend themselves to the Reading and Study of every considerate Person.

This indeed is the Consideration, upon which our Saviour argues in the Text. He bids his *Jewish* Auditors *Search the Scriptures, because in them they thought they had eternal Life*. [To think they have] is a common and well-known Periphrasis of the *Jewish* Idiom and the *Hebrew* Language, to express their

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Assurance and Certainty of any Thing : And these Words do not imply any Question or Doubt in that Matter, but are altogether as positive an Affirmation, as if the Expression had been this, [for in them ye *have* eternal Life.] The Motive here assign'd by our Saviour, to the Exercise of Reading and Searching the Scriptures, is still in full force, and will be of eternal Obligation. In the Sequel of this Discourse I shall join some others to it; and from their united Force shall press on your Consciences the Duty recommended.

But because it is vain and to no Purpose to urge Men to a diligent Search and Perusal of these sacred Volumes, unless they are first perswaded, they have a Right to do so; and it being certain, that no Man can be under an Obligation to practice what is at the same Time unlawful for him to practice; and withall, it being the profess'd Doctrine of a considerable Part of the Christian Church, that the *Laitie* have no Right to the Use of Scripture, but are to be debarr'd from it, and to receive it only from the Mouths of their Teachers, it is therefore become necessary, before we urge on Men's Consciences the Study of the Scriptures, that we first make it appear, that they have a Right to study them; that we make good their Title and Claim to them; and convince them, that the Thing is
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lawful, before we exact it as a Branch of Duty.

The Method therefore which I am determin'd to follow in the present Discourse, is This;

First, To shew, that every Person hath a full Power, and just Right to use the Scriptures.

Secondly, That as every Person hath this Right, so he is under many Obligations to make Use of this Right; and to *search the Scriptures* for his Improvement and Advancement in sacred Knowledge, and Perfection in moral Duties.

Lastly, for the Direction of vulgar and ordinary Capacities, it may not be improper to subjoin a few Rules to be observ'd in this Exercise, that it may be follow'd by those Advantages which may be expected from it.

In the First Place then, I am to shew, that every Person, without Distinction, hath a full Power and just Right to use the Holy Scriptures.

The Commands of God, in Holy Scripture, to this promiscuous and unrestrain'd Liberty in the Use of his Laws, are the first Argument to be alledg'd in this Place.

It is observable, that at his giving the Law, He doth not confine it to the Use of his Priests only, but obliges every *Jew* to be conversant in it. Thus, the Promulgation of it, in the *Sixth of Deuteronomy* at the Sixth Verse, and onward,

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onward, is universal, and clogg'd with no Exception. It is introduc'd with, *Hear O Israel*; and the Command is address'd to the whole Congregation. *The Words* (continues the Author,) *which I command thee this Day, shall be in thy Heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy Children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine House, and when thou walkest by the Way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up; And thou shalt bind them for a Sign upon thine Hand, and they shall be as Frontlets between thine Eyes; and thou shalt write them upon the Posts of thine House, and on thy Gates.*

The Substance of this plain Command is again repeated in the *Thirty First* Chapter of the same Book, at the *Eleventh* and *Twelfth* Verses; *When all Israel* (saith Moses,) *shall come to appear before The Lord thy God, in the Place which He shall chuse, Thou shalt read this Law before all Israel, and in their Hearing: Gather the People together, Men, and Women, and Children, and the Stranger that is within thy Gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear The Lord your God, and observe to do all the Words of this Law; and that their Children, which have not known any Thing, may hear, and learn to fear The Lord your God, as long as ye live in the Land whither ye go over to possess it.*

The other Books of the Old Testament concur in the same Sentiment. Holy David is so far from excluding any Person from this Benefit, that in the *Second Verse* of his *First Psalm*, he declares it to be a great Part of the Blessedness of God's Servants. *Blessed, (saith he,) is the Man, whose delight is in the Law of The Lord; and in his Law doth he meditate Day and Night.* And, not to multiply Proofs from The Old Testament; By the Mouth of his Servant *Joshua* God repeated this Command, and enforc'd the Practice of it by the Sanction of a Promise of a very great Reward. *This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy Mouth; but Thou shalt meditate therein Day and Night, that thou mayst observe to do according to all that is written therein; For then shalt Thou make thy Way prosperous, and then shalt Thou have good Success.* These are manifest Indications, that God indulges all Men in the free Use of his reveal'd Will, and allows no such sacrilegious Attempt, as the Robbing his People of their Birth-right, the Holy Scriptures.

The Directions and Injunctions of The New Testament in this Particular, are as express and positive as those of The Old. Our Saviour, in the Text, commands his Audience to *Search the Scriptures*; which supposes, and necessarily implies, that they had a Permission, and

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and a Right to do so. St Peter tells us, (Epistle the *Second*, Chapter the *First*, and Verse the *Nineteenth*;) that *we have a sure Word of Prophecy, to which we do well to give Heed.* St John in the *First* Chapter of the *Revelations*, v. 3. declares him *Blessed that readeth, and them Blessed that hear the Words of this Prophecy:* And St Paul advises (*Coloss. 3. 16.*) that *the Word of Christ dwell in us richly in all Wisdom.* The same St Paul applauds it as an Happiness in *Timothy*, that *from a Child he had known the holy Scriptures;* and greatly commends it in the *Inhabitants of Berea*, that *they had search'd the Scriptures whether Things were so,* as the Apostles preach'd them. All these Things lay'd together put it beyond Question, that every Man hath a Right to the Reading and Examining the Word of God; it being otherwise absurd, that God should injoin the Practice of it in so frequent, and so strong Terms; or commend those who have made Use of that Liberty, which, upon the contrary Supposition, must be ungrounded and unwarrantable.

But farther; Had we no Foundation for this Practice from Scripture, and had we Nothing to plead for this Liberty from the Word of God, yet the very End and Design of this Revelation would have been a sufficient Warrant for its universal Use; and the Intention
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which God had in communicating his Will, would have been a just Plea for the promiscuous and unrestrain'd Searching it.

The Design of the Almighty was visibly to make this Revelation of universal Benefit and Advantage. It was his Will, that all Men (none excepted) should, by the Means of this Dispensation, come to the Knowledge of his Truth, and happily obtain Salvation through it; It was his Intention, that it should lead all Men into the Practice of their Duty: And therefore, as it was calculated for, so it was to be apply'd to, every Man's Exigencies. It was with this View that this Law was fram'd with that Latitude, Comprehension and Extensiveness, which is so conspicuous in it, and by which it is adapted to every Condition of Man. He himself hath told us (*2 Tim. 3. 16.*) that it is *profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness, that the Man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnish'd to all good Works.*

It was with this View, that God hath therein made Provision for all our spiritual Wants of what Kind soever; that He there reaches out *Milk for Babes*, as well as *stronger Meats* for greater Proficients; and hath proportion'd his wholesome Medicines to the Wants and Capacities of his Servants. These his wise Provisions evidently point out his Design in making

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making them. The universal Fitness of his Law, is a Demonstration that He intended it's Use should be universal. It would not be consistent with his Wisdom to provide for all Degrees of Men, were not all Degrees of Men to be appriz'd of these Provisions; or to enact a Law of universal Use, and at the same Time afford it no sufficient Promulgation, but lock it up from the Knowledge of those Persons it was design'd to benefit.

Again; It is a sufficient Intimation of the Right which every Christian hath to the Reading the Word of God, that the several Books of it are inscrib'd and address'd, Not to any particular Men, Not to any Body of Believers as distinguish'd from the rest, Not to The Bishops, or *Clergy* of the several Churches exclusive of the *Laity*, but in the most general and comprehensive Terms that can be devis'd; — *To all that are call'd; To all the Elect; To all the Saints* (the common Name of Believers in the first Age,) and, *To all that call on the Name of The Lord Jesus*. So, The Epistle to the *Romans* (Chap. i. v. 7.) is directed, *To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be Saints*: And yet more expressly in the *First* to the *Corinthians*, (Chap. i. v. 2.) *Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, call'd to be Saints, with all that in every Place call upon the Name*
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of *Jesus Christ our Lord*. From these Inscriptions it is most apparent, that the Body of Believers have an equal Right to the Use of these Books; and consequently, that to debar them of this Right, is an injurious Deprivation, and a Robbing them of a Benefit of which God hath given them a Share.

Agreeable hereto hath been the Practice of the Church of God in her best and purest Ages. Under the *Jewish* Law there was no such Restraint, as hath, in later Ages, been put upon Christians; but every *Jew*, that could purchase it, was bound to have a Copy of the Writings of the Old Testament: And it is well known, that when, after their Return from their *Seventy-Years Captivity* at *Babylon*, the Body of that People had lost their Mother Tongue, and the original *Hebrew* Text was no longer understood by them, *Ezra* the Scribe, and the other Doctors of that Church, procur'd the Holy Scriptures to be expounded to them in the *Chaldee* Language, (which only they then spoke,) for the Use of the People that understood none other. And it was probably the same Necessity that gave Occasion to the *Greek* Translation of those Scriptures, (which generally passes under the Name of the *Septuagint*;) it being compos'd chiefly for the Use of such *Jews*, as were dispers'd among the *Gentile* Nations; and especially in the King-

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dom of *Egypt*, where their Numbers were very great. Such was the Care of the *Hebrew* Church, that none of her Children might be without the Holy Scriptures!

Equal thereto was the Provision made by the *Christian* Church at her first Institution. The Scriptures of the New Testament being originally written in *Greek*, they were translated very early into the Languages of all Nations, where *Christianity* had gain'd a Settlement; and many of those Versions, or Translations, which are judg'd to be as old as the very first Ages of the Church, are still extant, and truly valuable.

And, that private *Christians* had in those Ages the Use of the Holy Scriptures, is from hence evident, that in the Times of Persecution their Heathen Enemies, under the severest Penalties, demanded of them their *Bibles*; and thought it half a Conquest over them, if they could be prevail'd on to give them up; They, who through Fear of Sufferings did so surrender them, being afterwards, in Derision and Contempt, usually call'd *Traditores*. And in no one Thing are the venerable Writings of those Ages, which are yet in Being, and come safe to our Hands, more earnest, solicitous and importunate with the Body of *Christians*, than to prevail with them to converse with the sacred Scriptures; to make them their constant

stant Study; to penetrate into their deepest Myſteries; to make themſelves Maſters of thoſe Books, and of whatever they contain; and to purſue the Knowledge of them with indefatigable Labour and Induſtry. Theſe are plain Evidences, that, in the pureſt Ages of Chriſtianity, every Believer had the Uſe of the Scriptures; And, that the *Laity* muſt be debarr'd them, was then a Doctrine unheard of, and unpractis'd.

But, it hath been alledg'd by the Writers of the *Romiſh* Church, in Vindication of this illegal Practice, that it is dangerous to put the Scriptures into the Hands of the *Laity*. Such an unreſtrain'd Freedom may poſſibly be detrimental, and give Riſe to innumerable Errors and Miſtakes in their Minds. The Generality of Readers, (ſay they,) are ignorant and unlearn'd, and by that Means may *wreſt the Scriptures to their own Deſtruction*. Such there were, (they tell us,) in the Times of the Apoſtles themſelves, who complain'd of, and lamented it; And ſuch there have been, and may be, as long as the World endureth: That therefore it is ſafer, upon this Account, that the *Laity* ſhould be forbidden all Uſe of the Scripture, than to venture on that Danger they may incur by reading it.

Many ſatisfactory Answers may be given to this Plea. It is poſſible indeed, that many Men

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may make an ill use of this Liberty, and read the Scripture with bad Designs. But we conceive, that a bare Possibility of this Evil is not a sufficient Warrant to justify the taking it entirely from them, when it was so apparently the Intention of God they should be allow'd the Use of it. The best Kinds of Things may be applied to ill Purposes: The most useful Knowledge and Learning hath been misemploy'd: But surely no Man doth therefore wish that Knowledge and Learning were banish'd out of the World.

The Apostles indeed complain'd, that in their Times the Ignorant and *Unlearn'd wrested the Scriptures to their own Destruction*: Yet we do not find that ever these Apostles suffer'd one Word to escape them, by which they might be suppos'd to forbid the Use of the Scriptures to such Men: And if They did not forbid it, for the same Reasons we ought not.

In Truth this Objection it self is founded on a wide Mistake in Matter of Fact. There is not that Danger of giving Rise to Error and Heresy, by permitting the Scriptures to be read by the *Laity*, as is suggested in this Argument. For, it is observable, that the great Errors and Heresies, which have so long disturb'd the Peace of the Church, have not proceeded from mere *Lay-men*, but been contriv'd and publish'd by those who waited at the Altar,

Altar, and whose Profession oblig'd them to a more peaceful Behaviour. *Paul of Samosata, Arius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, and Eutyches* are Instances of this Truth; not to descend to the Histories of the following Ages, or that of our own Times. It cannot therefore be pleaded as a just Excuse for denying the Scripture to the *Laity*, that the Allowance of it hath given Occasion to Heresies, when the contrary is so apparent from History and Experience.

Having thus evinc'd my First Proposition, That every Person hath a full Power, and just Right to the Use of the Holy Scriptures, I go on, in the *Second Place*, to shew, that we are all under many Obligations to practise and make Use of this Right, in reading and searching these Books for our Improvement in Christian Knowledge, and our Perfection in moral Duties.

The Arguments from whence I shall enforce the Duty of reading and meditating on the Word of God, shall be taken,

1. From the Commands of God himself: and
2. From the Usefulness of this Practice, and the many Advantages we may reap from it.

The same Texts, which I made Use of in the former Part of this Discourse, are here again applicable, as carrying direct Injunctions to this great Duty. *The Words* (saith The Lord by *Moses*, *Deut. 6. 6.*) *which I com-*

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mand thee this Day, shall be in thine Heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy Children; and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine House, and when thou walkest by the Way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up: And thou shalt bind them for a Sign upon thine Hands, and they shall be as Frontlets between thine Eyes; and thou shalt write them upon the Posts of thine House, and on thy Gates. The Royal Psalmist calls the Man blessed, whose Delight is in the Law of The Lord, and who exercises himself therein Day and Night. God had moreover particularly order'd, that the Rulers of his People Israel should be well vers'd in the Book of the Law; and his Servant Joshua made the Command more extensive, by telling the whole Congregation, (Josh. i. 8.) *This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy Mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein Day and Night; that thou mayst observe to do all that is written therein.*

The Words of our Saviour in the Text are to the same Purpose; which Words, if they are taken as an *Affertion*, [*Ye do search the Scriptures,*] do at least imply a Commendation, and Approbation of this holy Exercise; but, if taken *imperatively*, do strictly and indispensably oblige us to this Study. St Peter's assuring us, that we do well to give Heed to the Word of Prophecy; St John's, that blessed is he

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that readeth and heareth the same; St Paul's, that the Word of Christ should dwell richly in all Wisdom; his commending the Bereans for this Practice; and applauding it as an Happiness in Timothy, that he had known the Scriptures from his Childhood, are abundant Proofs, that the Study of the sacred Writings is a Duty requir'd at our Hands; what cannot be neglected without a Breach of God's Laws, and an Affront offer'd to him.

But, in The Second Place, the Usefulness of this Practice to ourselves, and the many Advantages we may reap from it, are a cogent and powerful Motive to a regular Discharge of this Duty.

The only valuable Knowledge, and the truly perfect Wisdom is contain'd and to be found in these Compositions alone. Where, excepting in these Volumes, can we be stor'd with proper Notions of God, or Ideas suitable to his infinite Perfections? Here He is represented as the Being He truly is; a spiritual, uncompounded Essence; a Being of all possible Perfection; and from whom all that is good is deriv'd and flows?

The Notions which the Heathens, who wanted these Books, had of him, were extremely gross and absurd: Nay, even the Jews themselves, (who yet had a Part of these Writings,) form'd Conceptions highly unworthy of

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of him. They represented him to themselves as a God delighted with the Blood of Sacrifices; as pleas'd with Incense, and the Fat of Rams; they thought, that a smoaking Altar was sweet to his Smell, and the Odour of burnt Beasts agreeable to his Nostrils. But, how much more worthy of him is the Conception which the holy Scriptures furnish us with? — that He is more delighted with the Sacrifice of our Hearts; that 'tis internal Purity and Holiness, which He seeks after; that to keep his Commandments is more grateful to him than Burnt-offerings, and to abstain from Evil more acceptable than Incense; In short, that *to do Justice, to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with our God*, will be accepted better than *Thousands of Rams, or Ten Thousands of Rivers of Oil.*

Other Systems have drawn him as a God of Dread and Terror; Our Scriptures as mild and gentle: Theirs, as an Object of our Fear and Horror; Ours, as an Object of our Love and Affection: Theirs, as severe and relentless in his Dealings; Ours, as compassionate, merciful, and unwilling to punish: Theirs, as a Being easily provok'd, and under Provocation implacable; Ours, as long-suffering and patient, and easily to be pleas'd. Whether of these Representations be most suitable to the Nature of God, consider'd as a Father,

a Creator, and a Redeemer, let the common Sense of Mankind judge and determine.

Farther; The Usefulness of a diligent Reading the holy Scriptures appears, not only from it's furnishing us with Ideas suitable to the Nature of God, but also, as they will instruct us in passing the best Judgment with relation to ourselves; — to our Original, and End; — to all our Circumstances in this World; — to the Virtues, and Vices into which we are capable of being led; — and to the Assurances, and Promises which respect another Life.

When we reflect on the Account, which we here find of our Original, What a Variety of Affections doth it raise within us? — Admiration of God's Omnipotence, who from a rude and unform'd Lump of Earth produc'd so beautiful a Creature; a deep Sense of his gracious Condescension, in stamping his own Image upon it; and ardent Thankfulness, for conferring on us the Dominion over the whole Creation. Compar'd with this How extravagant and wild are all the other Accounts of Man's Original? Whether, with some, we suppose him to be Coeternal with God, and make infinite Successions of Men; — Whether, with others, we imagine him to be spontaneously produc'd; or, Whether, with a third Sort, we ascribe his Production to blind Chance, and fortuitous Concourse of Matter.

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With regard to our present State, our latter End, and our future Condition, Where is the Vanity of the former, the Necessity of providing for the second, and the Description of the Happiness or Torment of the last, more fully, more earnestly, and more movingly set forth, than in the sacred Writings?

But, considering these Books under the Notion of (what they were chiefly given us for) a Rule of Life, and a Guide of Manners, we shall find in them the best System of Morality that the World hath seen. The high and aspiring Thoughts, which either an extended Dominion, an Affluence of Wealth and Power, an extensive Knowledge and Understanding, or any other Accomplishments, upon which Men are apt to value themselves, would inspire us with, are here directed to be sunk in an unfeign'd Humility, a low Opinion, and even Contempt of Power, an Over-looking what this World can tempt us with, and a declining any Eminence and Superiority in it. The Benevolence, which is due to our Fellow-Creatures; The universal Good-Will and Charity, with which we ought to pursue our Brethren; The ready Forgiveness of Injuries receiv'd, and just Reparation for Injuries done; In a Word, all the Virtues of Humanity, are, in these Books recommended to our Practice in the strongest Terms, and by the most pressing Motives.

These, and other like Virtues had indeed been recommended to Practice by both the *Heathen*, and *Jewish* Moralists. They had spoken finely on them: They had set them out in as good Colours as Art and Rhetorick could give them. But all the while These were but Orators; They wanted Weight to enforce them; Their Authority could not carry them on with Success; and they were not back'd by that commanding Influence, with which our Blessed Lord preached. What *He spake*, was such as never *Man spake*; and what He taught, was deliver'd with a becoming Authority, and not in the lifeless, languid Manner of the Scribes.

But, I should far exceed my stated Time, should I pursue this Subject as far as it might be carried; and, in all the several Virtues of a good Life exemplify the Perfection of the Scripture Morality; or should I attempt to shew how visibly it tends to promote practical Holiness; and consequently, how worthy it is of our Reading, Study, and incessant Meditation. Let it suffice to observe, that the Perfection of the Morality of the Scriptures hath, in all the several Ages of Christianity, (and especially in the first,) been produc'd, and insisted on as a valid Proof of their Divine Original, and the Inspiration of their Authors. The Primitive Christians valud themselves, and

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and magnify'd their Law upon the Reformation, which it wrought in the Lives of Converts; and strenuously urg'd it as the most strong Presumption, that That Religion must necessarily be of Divine Institution, which could effect such a thorough Change of Manners, even in the most profligate and abandon'd Sinners.

Lastly, and to finish this Head; The Scriptures greatly recommend themselves to our constant Reading, inasmuch as the Rewards, which they propose, and the Promises, which they make to the Followers of it's Rules, are vastly greater than those of any other Law. We have now a well-grounded Hope, (or rather a certain Assurance,) of eternal Bliss for our Labours in the Cause of Virtue; as, on the other Hand, a fearful Looking-for of Judgment, as a Punishment for Sin and Vice. The Joys of the future State of the Blessed, and the Miseries of Damned Spirits, made scarce any Part in the *Heathen* System, and were but faintly and obscurely deliver'd in the *Jewish*. *Jesus Christ*, the Saviour of the World, first gave us undeniable Proofs of these. The Happiness of another Life was what no Man but He had Authority to promise, or Ability to procure. No other Man could ever presume to assure his Disciples, that they should be for ever Blessed; and consequently, all other Systems

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Items are inferiour to the Scriptures, in this respect, that they are not back'd by so prevailing Motives, nor enforc'd on us by so powerful Encouragements.

I must hasten now, in The *Third* and Last Place, to subjoin briefly a few Rules and Directions to be observ'd in this holy Exercise, that it may be follow'd by those eminent Advantages, which are justly to be expected from it.

The first of these shall be, That we read these Writings with Reverence and Attention. That Disposition of Mind which best befits this sacred Book, is, Awe, and Regard. We are to reflect, that we have at these Times in our Hands a Volume, in some Sense, of God's own Composition; a Book which hath the same Author as ourselves have; a Treasure of more than human Wisdom; and, the last and best Gift of Heaven. In our perusing other Compositions a Liberty may be allow'd to censure: we may freely give our Opinion upon the Performance of the Matter; may indulge our Criticism; — may innocently reprehend the Faults of the Writer; — may complain of Want of Justness in Sentiment, Correctness in Reflexion, Insincerity in Character, or Falsity in Matter of Fact: But, we must keep at a Distance from any Thing of this Kind, when we meditate on Scripture: What would be

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commendable there, would here be highly culpable: What would there be just, would here be profane: What would there be Correcting, would here be dishonouring: And, What would there be only severe, would here be downright Blasphemy. We are to reflect, that the Writing before us, is Not a vulgar and common one; — is Not the Product of a Pen, whose End was, to divert and amuse us; — was Not written with a Design to be the Employment of an idle Hour, or to furnish us with gay Thoughts, sprightly Imaginations, and lively Expressions; but to be subservient to the accomplishing the greatest Happiness and Perfection our Nature is capable of receiving; to be the happy Instrument of guiding us to eternal Salvation; and of bringing us, as to a Likeness, so to a Fruition of God himself. Such as These ought to be our Reflexions at the Time of our studying the holy Scriptures; and These will produce that Seriousness, and Attention, which so awful an Action requires. To this Temper of Mind we are to add, in the Second Place, Sincerity and Impartiality. This consists in an honest Heart, upright Intentions, and an unfeign'd Desire of finding Truth. The Disposition now recommended, hath Place chiefly in our Searches after Matters of Doctrine, and especially those which have been the Subjects of Controversy. Here we

we are to judge without Partiality to private Opinion; without sinister, or interested Views; to lay aside all Prejudices; and not to strain and do Violence to the Text, to force a Compliance with our prejudicate Sentiments. The Generality of Readers, it is much to be fear'd, first lay down an *Hypothesis* suitable to their own Opinions and Judgments, and then examine and rack the Scripture for Texts to support it. Hence hath flow'd that loose Method of interpreting Scripture, of late taken up, and which seems to be growing fashionable; and Hence those groundless Distinctions of the Sense of Scripture, which have been sometimes us'd. What innumerable Mischiefs to *Christianity* hath this wanton Method produc'd? as if Scripture were to signify any Thing, to which a fertile Invention can distort it; and, as if Truth, (which, like it's Author, is but One,) could bear Two contrary Aspects. Those, who read Scripture without this Sincerity and Impartiality, begin their Search after Truth at the wrong End: They place their own prejudicate Sentiments in the Chair, and make the Scripture follow them; whereas they themselves should be led by this unerring, infallible Guide.

A Third Thing requisite in our perusing the sacred Scripture, is, that we apply every Part of it to ourselves; — that we bring it home

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to our own Consciences, and seriously examine, Whether we ourselves are not concern'd in what is then before us. The Encouragements and Incitements to Virtue, and the Threats and Denunciations against Sin, are of universal Concernment, and applicable to every private Person. These we are to look on as immediately affecting us, and in which we have a near and very important Interest. Even the Historical Parts of Scripture, from which little other Use can be drawn to the Generality of Readers, have herein a considerable Influence, and were written for our Example. Vicious Practices may very well be describ'd in general Terms; The Folly and Unreasonableness of them may be set forth in very lively Colours; and the Audience may be thoroughly convinc'd that any immoral Practice is absurd and ridiculous; and yet all the Discourse will lose it's Effect, unless the guilty Person applies it to himself, and supposes that he himself sat for the Picture.

It was the Want of this Self-Application that render'd the Preaching of our Saviour fruitless and ineffectual on the far greater Part of the *Jewish* People. They heard his Parables with Attention; They dwelt on the soft, and melting Accents of his Tongue; They acknowledged that his Words were authoritative, and that *He spake as never Man spake*: but, at the same

same Time, could not see that they Themselves were the Subjects of his Discourse, and that the Sins, he so severely censur'd, were theirs and their Forefathers.

The last Direction for the profitable Reading the Scriptures I shall mention, shall be, that of Prayer for the Concurrence of God's Help and Assistance; that He would prosper us in these our Applications; that He would *open our Eyes to behold the wondrous Things of his Law*; that He would not *hide his Commandments from us*; but that the same Holy Spirit, which inspir'd and dictated these Writings, would also enable us to *read, mark, learn, and inwardly to digest them*.



SERMON

SERMON VIII.

MARK XIII. 32.

But of that Day and Hour knoweth no Man, no not the Angels which are in Heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

IN the Discharge of that important and indispensable Duty of a Christian, the Reading and Meditating on the Word of God contain'd in the Holy Scriptures, it must be confess'd there arise many Discouragements, and sundry Difficulties.

The chief of these take their Rise either from those Texts whose very Meaning is obscure, and which are conceiv'd in Words hard to be understood; or else from those, whose Terms are indeed easy and clear, but whose Sense, at the same Time, bears a seeming Repugnancy to some other Text of Scripture equally clear.

The Obscurity of one Part of Scripture, or the Inconsistency and seeming Opposition between

tween different Parts of it, must necessarily occasion Trouble to the Reader; and is thereby become the Foundation of Uneasiness to those who do read, as well as often pleaded in their Excuse and Vindication by those who do not read it.

The Text which I have prefix'd to this Discourse, is an Example of the later Kind. It is here very clearly alledg'd by our Saviour himself, that He was entirely ignorant of the Day of his Coming, and that That Day and Hour was reserv'd to the Knowledge of God alone; Yet, in other Texts of Scripture, (which shall be produc'd in the Sequel of this Discourse,) it is as clearly affirm'd, that *He knoweth all Things*, — that *there is Nothing hid from him*, — that, as He is God, He must be *Omniſcient*, and privy to all the Counſels and Decrees of his Father.

When Difficulties of this Nature occur, (as they must occur to every discerning and intelligent Reader,) they unavoidably raise some Distraction in the Mind, and occasion Doubts and Uneasiness, by perplexing the Thoughts of the most sincere, upright, and well-meaning Christians.

So far as this, the Inconvenience is not very great; nor are the ill Consequences many to the honest and sincere Believer. The Difficulties of Scripture are rather of Benefit and

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Advantage to Men thus qualified, as they are fit Exercises of their Labour and Industry; Tryals of their Faith and Patience; and as their final Success in explaining and unravelling them, makes them ample Amends for their Trouble, and gives them that solid Pleasure and Satisfaction, which is always the Consequence of our having discover'd Truth and overcome a Doubt.

But, the Misfortune is, that those Difficulties of Scripture, which, as I said, might be turn'd to great Advantage, and be made subservient to many good Uses by sincere and upright Christians, and by Minds duly qualified, have a very ill Effect, and most pernicious Tendency on Men of opposite Dispositions; and who, from thence, draw Conclusions to their own fatal Destruction. These Men having unhappily imbib'd Prejudices against either Religion in general, or against some single Tenet and Doctrine of it, take Occasion from these Difficulties in the sacred Writings, to disavow and reject the whole; or, at least, to oppose themselves to that establish'd Tenet, which doth not comport and agree with their Sentiments.

An Instance of this, with respect to two different Sorts of Men, we are furnish'd with from these Words of *St Mark*, which I have now read to You. It is beyond Contradiction
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evident from other Texts of Scripture, that our Saviour is vested with an all-perfect Knowledge; and yet He himself here declares, that He knew not the Day and Hour of his Coming.

This hath given an Handle to the Enemies of Christianity, and those who deny a Divine Revelation, to charge the Scripture with Self-Contradiction; with denying in one Place what it had affirm'd in another; and consequently, to maintain, that God, (a Being of the strictest Veracity, and incapable of Error,) cannot possibly be the Author of those Books, as is pretended.

Another Sort of Men, who can by no means digest the receiv'd, and Catholick Doctrine concerning the *Divinity of The Son of God*, and *a Trinity of distinct Persons in the One Supreme Deity*, do from these Words draw an Argument in Support of their Opinion, and plausibly infer, that That Person cannot be One Being with the proper and true God, whose Knowledge is finite, and from whom any one Event, present or future is conceal'd.

Such are the ill Uses, too frequent and observable, which have by unwary Men been made of the Difficulties of Scripture in general, and of this Passage of *St Mark* in particular. And therefore, for the quieting all such Scruples, as may from these Words arise in the Minds of pious and well-dispos'd Christians;

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stians; and for the removing any Prejudices, which may from thence be drawn against the establish'd and receiv'd Truths of *Christianity*, I propose to treat of them distinctly and at large; and to lay before You the Drift and Purpose of this Declaration of *Christ*, that *No Man knoweth the Day and Hour of his Coming; no not the Angels, neither the Son, but the Father.*

In handling these Words, I shall observe the following Method;

First, I shall enquire into their true Import and Signification; in What Sense our Saviour deliver'd them; and, in What Respect it is true, that *Christ*, (or, as He here styles himself, *The Son*,) was Not acquainted with the Time of his Coming.

Secondly, From the Words thus to be explain'd and restor'd to their genuine and proper Import, I shall treat on some useful Points of Doctrine, which they contain; and improve them to certain practical Uses, implicitly to be found in them.

In the First Place then, I am to enquire into the true Import and Signification of these Words; in What Sense our Saviour deliver'd them; and in What Respect it is true, that *Christ*, (or as He styles himself, *The Son*,) was Not acquainted with the Time of his Coming.

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The Coming of our Saviour, (which is the Subject of these Words,) and of the precise Time of which he declares his Ignorance, may, and hath been, differently interpreted; and is capable of two Senses, each of which is agreeable to the usual Phrase and Language of Scripture, and very fitly comports with the Context in this very Chapter.

The Destruction of *Jerusalem*, and the Consequent of it, the abolishing both the Temple and Worship of the *Jews*, is frequently call'd the Appearance of *the Son of Man*, and *the Coming of Christ*: And of this is to be understood all the former Part of this Chapter, from Verse the *first* to Verse the *twenty fourth*.

The great Day of Judgment also, and the final Retribution of Rewards and Punishments at the Appearance of *Christ* in his Glory, is as often distinguish'd in the New Testament by the Name of the Coming of *The Son of Man*: And of this latter Coming may most properly be understood all that is deliver'd in the latter Part of this Chapter, from the *twenty fourth* Verse to the End. The Text therefore being in the latter Part of the Chapter, in which the Day of Judgment is describ'd, seems most naturally, to belong to That Event; and consequently to imply our Saviour's Ignorance of the Day of final Judgment; and is understood to do so by all the Fathers and
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elder Writers of the Christian Church; tho', in this particular, the more modern Commentators have receded from them, and generally apply them to the Destruction of *Jerusalem*.

But this is a Dispute of a very trivial Nature; nor doth it at all alter the Case before us. The Difficulty still returns, whichsoever of these two Events be understood. It is the Ignorance, here ascrib'd to *Christ*, that perplexes this Text: And whether that Ignorance relate to the Day of Judgment, or to the Destruction of *Jerusalem*, makes no manner of Difference in the Case.

This Distinction therefore, concerning the Object of this Ignorance in our Saviour, being of no Use or Service towards accounting for this intricate Passage of Scripture, some other Method must be sought and enquir'd for. It is very certain, that in other Parts of Scripture, the Attribute of *Omniscience* is ascrib'd to God *The Son*; and He is declar'd to be *All-knowing*, in Terms equivalent, and altogether as strong as those, in which that Perfection is ascrib'd to his Father.

Thus, in the *Twenty first* Chapter of Saint *John's* Gospel, V. 17. after having *three* Times repeated that Question to St *Peter*, [*Lovest Thou me?*] He receiv'd for Answer from that Apostle, with some Warmth and Emotion, *Lord, Thou knowest all Things; Thou knowest*

that I love Thee. And in this frank Declaration St Peter did not speak his own Sentiments only, since the whole College of the Apostles had witness'd to the same Truth before this Occasion, as you will find by their Words, Chapter the *Sixteenth*, and Verse the *Thirtieth* of the same Gospel; *Now we are sure that Thou knowest all Things, and needest not that any Man should ask Thee.* In the *Second* Chapter of *The Revelations* by St John, He speaks of himself, *I am He that searcheth the Reins and Heart.* In the *Sixth* of St Luke, Verse the *Eighth*, He is affirm'd to *know the Thoughts of Men*; and, in the *Second* of St John, Verse the *Sixty Fourth*, it is said, that *Jesus knew from the Beginning who they were that believ'd not, and who should betray him.* These are the Scripture Accounts concerning the extensive and perfect Knowledge inherent in our Saviour.

And, beside the Clearness, and Positiveness of the Words themselves, it is farther remarkable, that these are the very same Form of Words, which the Scripture in other Places makes Use of, to describe the Omniscience of God *The Father* himself, and that perfect Knowledge, which is proper, and confin'd to the Divine Nature. So, in the *sixteenth* Chapter of the *first* Book of *Samuel*, Verse the *seventh*, the Knowledge of God is describ'd by these Words,

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The Lord looketh on the Heart: And in the *twenty eighth* Chapter of the *first* Book of *Chronicles*, Verse the *ninth*, *David*, in his Charge to *Solomon*, expresses God's Omniscience in these Words, *The Lord searcheth all Hearts, and understandeth all the Imaginations of the Thoughts.* From these several Parts of Scripture it appears, that *The Son of God* is possess'd of the Divine Attribute of *Omniscience*; and that too (that no Ambiguity may be pretended in the Words, nor the Expressions on either side be capable of being soften'd,) in the same Latitude of Expression, in the very same Phrases and Words, as God *The Father* himself is, or as *Omniscience* is appropriated to *The Divine Nature*.

But Farther, Had the holy Scripture afforded no such flagrant Proofs, and express Testimonies of the all-perfect Knowledge of *The Son of God*, yet the maintaining That Position, would have been no more than the necessary and unavoidable Consequence of what it, in so many Places, ascribes to him, and that is, True and Proper *Divinity*.

He is so peculiarly and eminently styl'd *God*, — *The true God*, — *God blest for ever*, — *The everlasting God*, (and that too in Contradistinction to all Beings which are styl'd *God* in a loose, improper, metaphorical and figurative Sense,) that there can be no Room to doubt

of his being possess'd of all the Properties of The Divine Nature; and consequently, of That, which obtains a chief Place among them, *Omniscience*. A true and proper God, whom yet we suppose to be ignorant of any Thing, is a Contradiction in Terms: It is to affirm of one and the same Being, that it is both Finite, and Infinite in the same respect: And, it is to declare, that a Being of universal Perfection, may be conceiv'd to want and be without one of the most valuable Perfections that can belong to that Nature. *Christ* therefore, as He is God, must necessarily be *Omniscient*, and endu'd with perfect Knowledge: And therefore, the Words of this Text cannot justly be interpreted in that Sense, which at first View they seem to present to us.

Lastly, Beside what hath already been alledg'd in Proof and Confirmation of the all-perfect Knowledge of *Christ*; notwithstanding the seeming Contrariety thereto, implied in these Words of St *Mark*, we may farther draw a convincing Argument for the same Truth, from the many express Predictions of future Events, which he gave out in the Course of his Ministry; and which, in that, and the following Ages, receiv'd full Completion, even in their most minute and particular Circumstances.

Thus, He foretold to his Followers the Treatment

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ment that was to befall his own Person: He describ'd the Particulars of his Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension; The Descent of the *Holy Ghost* on his Disciples at the Day of *Pentecost*; and the inveterate Hatred and Malice, with which the *Jews* would pursue them: But above all, the Destruction of the City and Temple of *Jerusalem* (afterwards accomplish'd by the *Roman* Army under the Command of *Titus*;) is so copiously and fully foretold in this Chapter of *St Mark*, from which my Text is taken, and in the *twenty fourth* Chapter of the Gospel by *St Matthew*, that it must for ever stand on Record as a Demonstration of both his *Omniscience* and his *Divinity*; none but God being able to foretell such future Contingencies, and expressly to determine the Manner in which they are to happen.

What hath hitherto been said under this *first* Head, (in which we are to Enquire into the genuine Import of this Text,) is design'd to shew, that the Ignorance of the Day of Judgment, here attributed to our Saviour, cannot be understood to relate to Him as He is a Person in The *Divine* Nature; because, (as hath been shewn,) the same holy Scriptures do fully attest his infinite Knowledge; and consequently, this Passage cannot now be objected in Prejudice of his true *Divinity*. It remains, that

that I now proceed explicitly and positively to determine, in What Sense these Words are to be understood, and in What Respects *Christ* was ignorant of the Day of Judgment. The several Solutions which have been given to this important Question I shall

First, briefly lay before You; and then

Secondly, establish those which seem to be the most probable.

And, First, in Order to evade the Difficulty arising from the Ignorance here ascrib'd to *Christ*, it hath been affirm'd by some Writers, (and those of great Name and Authority,) that this Text is no genuine Part of St *Mark's* Gospel; that it was not written by that Apostle, but first interpolated and foisted in by the *Arians* to favour their Cause, and in some Measure to justify their Pretensions, that our Saviour was not truly and properly *God*, because not endu'd with universal Knowledge.

The Reason for which it was believ'd to be an Interpolation by the *Arians*, was, that anciently (it seems) many Manuscript Copies of the New Testament had not this Text of Saint *Mark* in them at all; and hence it was concluded, that such as had these Words, were forg'd and interpolated by the *Arians*.

But, all this is a wide Mistake: It is certain that these Words were a Part of Scripture, and acknowledg'd so to be in the Writings of several

veral Authors, who liv'd before the Rise of the *Arian* Herefy; and consequently, they could not be foisted in by the *Arians* to succour their Cause. And therefore, it is most probable, that if there ever were any Copies of the New Testament, which had not this Text, (for at this Time there is no one extant which hath it not,) it came to pass, rather thro' the Omision of the Orthodox, (who might drop it, as seeming to favour the *Arians*,) than that it was at first an Interpolation by the Friends of *Arianism*.

Another Solution of this Text, which hath been given, is, that when *Christ* here affirms that He [knew not the Day of Judgment,] the Term [know not] implies no more, than that He would not [declare it,] or would not [reveal it.] And indeed it must be own'd, that the Expression [know not] is sometimes in Scripture taken in this Sense, for [not to declare, reveal, or communicate.] So, when *St Paul* affirms to the *Corinthians*, 1. Ep. Ch. 2. V. 2. that he had *determin'd not to know any Thing among them save Jesus Christ*, his plain Meaning is, that he had determin'd not to *teach* or *impart* any Doctrine among them save that of *Jesus Christ*: And it would be absurd to imagine, that the Apostle, strictly speaking, knew Nothing but *Jesus Christ*, when it is certain that in most other valuable Parts
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of Knowledge he had made uncommon Proficiency, and had acquir'd a great Stock of human Learning.

But, tho' the Words of our Text will confessedly bear this Sense, yet this cannot possibly be their Signification here. For, it being here declar'd, that The Son doth Not know the Day of Judgment, and yet, that The Father doth know it, if by [not knowing] in this Place be meant no more than [not revealing, or not disclosing it,] it is evident, that in That Sense, The Father himself doth not know it; because He hath never thought proper to impart the Knowledge of it to any Person whatsoever; and therefore, may as well be said to be ignorant of it, as Men, Angels, or his own Son are here declar'd to be.

And indeed, if by not knowing the Day of Judgment, be meant no more than not revealing it, our Saviour's affirming, that his Father did know it, cannot be strictly true: For, He doth not so know it, as to reveal and declare it; but still continues, and will always do so, to keep it secret from all Men.

These Accounts therefore not seeming satisfactory, let us proceed to such as are better establish'd, and carry greater Weight.

Amongst these, One is *That* which was given by the earliest Writers of the Church, when this Text was objected to them by such as deny'd

deny'd our Blessed Lord's Divinity. The Answer then given to it was, That when our Lord declar'd that He knew not the precise Time of Judgment, He spake it with Reference to his *Human* Nature only; that as He was Man, and the Son of a Woman, — as He had assum'd a Body of human Substance, and had a Soul in no wise different from that of other Men, so the human Nature, which he had assum'd, was such, as had no greater Perfections in him, than it had in other Men. It is therefore Nothing strange, that, as He was *Man*, and consider'd only in that respect, He should not know the Day of Judgment, *That* being no Part of human Knowledge; and yet, as He was *God*, and a Person in The *Divine* Nature, He might perfectly know it.

In the Union of the Two Natures in his Person, at the Time of his Incarnation, The Divine Nature did not, indeed could not, communicate and impart to his Manhood, either infinite Knowledge, or any other of the Attributes, which are peculiar to the Nature of The Godhead: And therefore, it is no Wonder, that in the Time of the Judgment, as well as other Matters, He was ignorant, *as Man*, of what, *as God*, He well knew.

Supposing then, as we well may, that our Saviour spoke these Words with relation to his *Human* Nature only, and not with respect to his

his *Divinity*; there is no Difficulty in conceiving, how He should be ignorant of the Day of Judgment; For, The *Godhead* in his Person knew it, tho' the *Manhood* did not.

To confirm this Exposition of the Text, it will be of Use to observe, that whilst our Saviour convers'd with us in the Flesh, and follow'd the Course of his Ministry among Men, the *Divine* Nature, tho' closely united to the *Human*, did not at all Times, and upon all Occasions, communicate it's Influences, to the *Manhood*, or fully impart to it it's powerful Virtue and Efficacy; but at certain Seasons, and upon particular Occasions, was as it were *Quiescent* in it, suspended it's Influences towards it, and left the *Manhood* to act by it self.

Thus, at the Time of his Temptation by the Devil, we must suppose, that The *Divine* Nature forbore to communicate it's Assistance to the *Manhood* and suspended it's Influence upon it; because a Temptation, properly speaking, there cannot be, where a Divine Power, (incapable, of being resisted,) is suppos'd to be concern'd.

So again, at the Time of his Crucifixion and Death, The *Divine* Nature withdrew all Intercourse with the *Human*, and left the Burthen of Suffering to be born by the *Manhood* only; in which Suffering it was impossible The *Godhead* should bear a Share.

From

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From these Instances it being evident, that The *Godhead* in *Christ* did, at some Periods of Time, withdraw it's Assistances, and suspend it's Influences on the *Manhood* in him, it may well be presum'd, that the Time when our Saviour thus declar'd his Ignorance of the Judgment-Day, was one of these Periods; that The *Divinity* in him was then quiescent; that it forbore to communicate itself, in the same manner, as it forbore at the before-mention'd Seasons of his Temptation, and Crucifixion. And thus, this Ignorance, which he here avers in himself, cannot be charg'd otherwise than, where it properly belong'd, on his *Manhood* only.

Another Answer, which clearly solves this difficult Text, is, That by *The Son*, is here understood only the Person of The *Messiah*, or The *Christ*. Now The *Messiah*, as such, was none other than a Messenger or Servant of The Father, to make known his Will in such particulars only, as should be given him in Charge to reveal and declare. Hence it is that He aver'd (*John 12. 49.*) that *He spake Nothing of himself; but his Father which sent him gave him Commandment what he should say, and what he should speak.* So again, in the seventh Chapter of that Gospel, v. 16. *My Doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.* And, in the fourteenth Chapter, v. 10. He says, *The Word which*

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I speak, I speak not of my self, but The Father which abideth in me.

From these Texts it appearing, that *Jesus*, consider'd as the *Messiah*, being impower'd to reveal and disclose no more, than what He should receive from The Father, and what should be imparted to him from that *Unction* with The *Holy Ghost*, which He receiv'd at his Baptism; and, it being as certain, that the Revealing the Day of Judgment, was no Part of his Prophetick Office, nor discover'd to him by The *Holy Spirit*, — it follow'd, that The *Messiah* must have been ignorant of it; as having never receiv'd the Knowledge of it, either from his Father, or The *Holy Spirit*.
 "It is one Thing, (as a Learned Writer observes,) to understand *The Son of God* barely
 "and abstractedly for The *Second Person* in
 "The *Holy Trinity*, or a Person truly God,
 "and another to understand him for The *Messiah*, or The *Second Person* incarnate. To
 "say, that The *Second Person* in The *Trinity*,
 "and who is truly God, knows not Something,
 "is blasphemous; But, to say so of The *Messiah*, is not so; who nevertheless was the
 "same with The *Second Person* in The *Trinity*.
 "For tho' The *Second Person*, consider'd with
 "relation to his Deity, was coequal with his
 "Father, and possess'd the same unbounded
 "Knowledge, — yet, as He was *God-Man*,
 "and

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“and consider'd as He was The *Messiah*, he
“was a Servant and Messenger of The *Father*,
“and receiv'd Authority and Commands from
“him.

In a Word, The Power by which our Sa-
viour wrought his Miracles, foretold future
Things, and had the Knowledge of Evange-
lical Mysteries, was deriv'd to his *Manhood*,
Not from that *Divine* Nature which was inhe-
rent in him, but from the Donation and A-
nointing of The *Holy Spirit* at his Baptism:
And, The *Holy Ghost* having not thought fit
to reveal to him the Knowledge of the Judg-
ment-Day, his *Manhood* must of Consequence,
be ignorant of it, without detracting from the
Dignity of his Person, or impeaching The *Di-
vine* Nature united to it.

Thus have I endeavour'd, under the First
Head of this Discourse, To give a clear Solu-
tion of this difficult Text of Scripture; and to
shew in What Sense our Saviour is here de-
clar'd to be ignorant of the Time of his Com-
ing to Judgment.

It hath now, I hope, been satisfactorily
made appear, That this was spoken with re-
lation to his *Manhood* only, and cannot be un-
derstood in any other Sense. Hence then the
Sincere and upright Christian may easily form
an Answer to all such Doubts, as arise in his
Mind, from this, and other like Passages of
Scripture;

Scripture; And from hence we may all see, how unreasonably this Passage hath been urg'd to serve the Interest of two different Causes, by the Enemies of our establish'd Faith, The *Deists*, and *Arians*.

Against the former we find, that they are not contradictory to other Texts of Scripture, which attribute *Omniscience* to *Christ*; because *They* are to be understood with relation to his *Godhead*, but *This* is to be interpreted only of his *Manhood*; so that these are easily reconcil'd, and made consistent with each other.

Against the latter we have shewn, that these Words cannot be brought to impeach the *Divinity* of our Saviour, or to infer that He is not *God*, because He knoweth not all Things; since the Ignorance, here spoken of, is ascrib'd to his *Manhood* only, and hath no manner of Relation to his *Divine Nature*.

I proceed now, in the Second Place, from the Words thus explain'd, and restor'd to their proper Import, briefly to treat on some useful Points of Doctrine which they contain, and improve them to certain practical Uses implicitly to be found in them.

Amongst these, the Subject Proposition of the Text is a very momentous and important one; namely, that neither Angels, nor Men, nor any Being but God only, hath a certain

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Foreknowledge of the determinate Time of the general Judgment.

This Knowledge God (doubtless for our Sakes,) hath nowhere reveal'd. It is not for us (as St Paul avers) *to know the Times and the Seasons, which God hath appointed.* Our Curiosity herein must be restrain'd. We must set proper Bounds to our Enquiries, and modestly be content to be ignorant, where the Providence and Goodness of God have granted us no Means of Information.

Of this we may confidently test assur'd, that had it been best for us to have had a certain Knowledge of that Day, the Knowledge of it would have been communicated to us. The same unbounded Goodness which mov'd The Almighty to instruct us in all Things, that are necessary, or profitable for us, mov'd him also to conceal from us other Things; because, as we may justly reason, He foresaw that such Knowledge would have been neither necessary, nor profitable.

Had the precise Time of the Day of Judgment been particularly known to us, no doubt a great Part of that Vigilance and Concern for it, which we now experience in ourselves, had been lost. The Awe and Apprehension of it's Approach, under which we now live, contribute largely to our Constancy and Perseverance in preparing ourselves for it. It lays

a Restraint on all our Actions, since we cannot be certain, but that the very Article of Time, in which we are committing a Sin, may present us to the Judgment-Seat of God, there to receive the Sentence of eternal Punishment. The known Distance of the Judgment-day would not have deterr'd us so much as the present Uncertainty of it. If ever therefore Ignorance can be call'd a Blessing; If ever it be a Happiness to us not to know, it certainly is so in the Case before us.

We frequently commend it as a Piece of Prudence in our natural Parents, to conceal from their Children Things, the Knowledge of which can bring them no Benefit, but which may possibly turn to their great Disadvantage. The Almighty hath herein acted with us like a truly tender and indulgent Father. He hath taken out of our Hands a dangerous Weapon, from whence no Advantage could be made by us in this our spiritual Warfare; but which, our own Mismanagement might probably have turn'd to our own Destruction. In the mean Time from this our Ignorance let us make that good Use, which our Saviour directs in the Words immediately following the Text; *Take ye Heed, watch and pray, for ye know not when the Time is.*

A Second Doctrine, of a practical Influence, deducible from this Subject, is, That as it hath been

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been largely shewn in the First Part, that our Saviour, as God, is *Omniscient* and all-conscious, so this Perswasion should engage us to many Duties resulting from it.

The perfect Knowledge of *Christ*, and his being present to all Circumstances should lay a general Restraint on our whole Behaviour; on our Thoughts, to which He is privy; on our Words, to which He is a Witness; and on our Works, of which He is entirely conscious. Who would dare to commit a Sin, even in secret, whilst at the same time he knows that it is no Secret to *Jesus Christ*? Who would flatter himself, that *his abominable Sin cannot be found out*, when an all-seeing Eye traces him thro' all his Paths? Who is so absurd as to say; *Tush, God cannot see it*, when he knows, that it was *He, who made the Eye*, and therefore, that *He must see it*? Who would dare to offend his Saviour, when he is confident, that That Saviour is appriz'd of all his Actions, and is finally to be his Judge for them at the last great Day? From his knowing our Hearts; from his *searching and trying our Reins*, let us be instructed to purify and cleanse them; to entertain and encourage no such Thoughts, as we should be ashamed to have known; to think soberly and uprightly; to harbour no sinful Inclinations; but to stifle them in their first Approaches, and in their earliest Motions.

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Thirdly, and to have done; It having been shewn, that our Saviour, as He was *Man*, was content to be ignorant of some Events, and in particular of the Day of Judgment, — hence also we may be instructed, to be content with that Share of Knowledge, (whatever it be,) which The Almighty hath been pleas'd to impart to us; to entertain low and humble Thoughts of our own Capacities; to abate those vain Conceits, which are often the Result of a good Proficiency in human Learning; not to aspire to that Knowledge, which God hath remov'd from us; not to be curious and inquisitive into the Secrets of Heaven; but to let our Searches be employ'd on their proper and adequate Subjects. Let us be content silently to adore those Mysteries which we cannot comprehend; and restrain our Curiosity in such inaccessible Subjects, as the Blessed Angels themselves, (Beings of a more comprehensive Knowledge,) do but endeavour and desire, yet ineffectually, to look into.



SERMON IX.

I. PETER III. 18, 19, 20.

*Christ also hath once suffer'd for Sins,
the Just for the Unjust, (that he
might bring us to God,) being put
to Death in the Flesh, but quickened
by the Spirit :*

*By which also he went and preached
unto the Spirits in Prison;*

*Which sometime were disobedient,
when once the Long-suffering of
God waited in the Days of Noah,
while the Ark was a preparing;
wherein few, that is, eight Souls
were saved by Water.*

THIS Text, tho' obscure and difficult
in some of it's Parts, doth yet in
others very clearly contain several
momentous Truths relating to the
Person, and Dispensation of Christ.

It confirms the Reality of his Death, and the Truth of his Resurrection by the Power, and Influence of *The Holy Ghost*. The former is implied in the Words [*put to Death in the Flesh;*] the latter in those immediately following [*being quickened by the Spirit.*]

Beside these, it suggests to us also the great Motive or final Cause of the Sufferings of *Christ* on the Cross, and the happy Effect, which these his Sufferings have procur'd for us: The one is, that *He suffer'd for Sins, the Just for the Unjust*; the other, that by Virtue, and in Consequence of these Sufferings, *He might bring us to God.*

When we reflect on the evident Force, and visible Import of these Terms, that *Christ hath once suffer'd for Sins, the Just for the Unjust*, it may seem very surprizing, that any Set of Men should deny that Satisfaction which *Christ* hath made to the Divine Justice for Sin; or assert, that his Death was only an eminent Example to us of Patience and Resignation under injurious Treatment, but no way a Propitiation or Attonement for our Sins. An Assertion not only derogatory from the Honour of our Saviour, — not only a Diminution of and Detraacting from the Value, the Perfection, and the Extensiveness of his Sacrifice on the Cross, but also, in the most palpable manner, contradictory to the express Letter of the sacred Text.

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When it is affirm'd, (as here it is,) that *Christ suffer'd for Sins*, is it not impious to affirm, that He suffer'd for Example only? When He is declar'd to have suffer'd for Sins, What other Sins can be understood, than those of Men? since, I suppose, it will not be asserted, that He had any of his own to expiate and atone for. And, when it is so plainly said, that in his Death *the Just suffer'd for* [or instead of] *the Unjust*, What other Sense can the Words possibly bear, than that *Christ*, who was innocent, atton'd for the guilty; that He suffer'd That Punishment, which should have fallen on us; that he made a vicarious Satisfaction for the Guilt of Men, and expiated human Transgressions?

The Event of this Satisfaction, with respect to Man, is here farther declar'd to be, *the Bringing him to God*; that is, that as wandering and lost Sheep, He might restore us to the right Way; that He might give us free Access to The Father by the Merit of his Suffering; that He might restore us to his Favour, and re-enter us into his more immediate Service; and withall, might render us more pure in his Sight, make us more like him, and implant in us such Affections, as might give us a nearer Resemblance to the Divine Original.

These are some of the most important Truths in the whole System of our Religion;

and which, you see, are easily deducible from this Passage of Scripture. But, it is not my Design at this Time to insist upon these. I have made choice of these Words for the present Subject, only for the sake of clearing their Sense, of rescuing them from the Obscurity, in which they are involv'd, of retrieving them from some false Glosses and Interpretations, which have been put on them, (and by which too they have been brought to patronize and give Countenance to many groundless Errors;) and for the sake of laying before You some useful Points both of Doctrine and Practice arising from, and included in them.

There is not, perhaps, any Text of the Sacred Writ more difficult and obscure, or which hath given Interpreters more Trouble, than this of St Peter, declaring that our Saviour *being quicken'd by The Spirit, went and preach'd to the Spirits in Prison; those Spirits by Name, which sometime were disobedient, when once the Long-Suffering of God waited in the Days of Noah, while the Ark was a preparing.*

The not being able to solve and account for the true Import of such intricate Passages in the Word of God, is of apparent Disservice, and of manifold ill Consequence, both to our Faith and Religion in general, and to the private Christian and Believer in particular.

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in general, we may observe, that it is no unusual Practice, but such as we may have sundry Examples of, that those who endeavour to corrupt our Faith, and add to it other Doctrines, which *Christ*, and his Apostles never reveal'd, make Choice of some obscure Text of Scripture whereon to establish their Foundation, and raise their Superstructure, and produce some difficult Passages, which in Sound indeed, or in Words, may seem at first View to look that Way; but which, if examin'd to the Bottom, and duly search'd, will be found to contain no such Doctrines, as have been father'd on them; but to bear sometimes a quite contrary, and at other times a very foreign and different Construction.

In this manner have these Words of *St Peter* been made Use of by the Writers of the Church of *Rome*; who have proceeded so far as to ground no less than Two Articles of Faith on them; both which they require us to believe on Pain of Damnation; yet neither of which receives any manner of Colour from this Text, as will be clearly shewn in the Sequel of this Discourse.

But, as I said, the not being able to solve such obscure Texts, is not only of Prejudice to our Faith in general, but is also of Disadvantage to the private Christian and Believer in particular. For, it not only gives the Reader

der Uneasiness and Dissatisfaction in his Mind, but also robs and defeats him of the very End of reading such Passages of Scripture; namely, his Improvement in *Christian* Knowledge, and his Edification in spiritual Duties.

The Scriptures are to be read with a View to these Two great Advantages; our Advancement in the Knowledge of the *Christian* Faith, and our Furtherance in practical Holiness, and the Duties of Morality. But, it is obvious, that Neither of these Ends can be attain'd, unless we thoroughly understand the Passages which we read. He who doth not comprehend the Sense of what he reads, can of Consequence have no Knowledge of what doctrinal Truths it contains, or of what practical Duties it recommends to his Exercise. The Use of these Books is so far lost to us as we do not understand them: and we read to no Purpose, if we attain not both the Doctrine, and the Morality deliver'd in Holy Scripture. If the Trumpet (to use St Paul's Illustration in a like Instance,) give an uncertain Sound, who shall prepare himself to the Battle? And, if it be our Duty, (as the same Apostle enjoins,) to pray with the Understanding, it is, for the same Reason, our Duty to read with the Understanding also.

For these Reasons I have made Choice of these Words of St Peter; because they are obscure

secure in themselves; they have been wrested to support some Doctrines, to which they give no Foundation; and they contain some important Truths both of Doctrine and Practice, to which I shall hereafter speak, and which do not offer themselves to common Readers.

In handling this Subject I shall observe the following Method:

First, I shall expound and give the true Import of the Text itself; shewing What is here to be understood by *Christ's preaching unto the Spirits in Prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the Long-Suffering of God waited in the Days of Noah while the Ark was a preparing.*

Secondly, I shall shew how manifestly this Text is misapplied to support certain Doctrines, which have been grounded on it by The Church of Rome. And,

Lastly, I shall close all with laying before You a few Propositions both of Doctrine, and Practice, which this Text contains, and furnishes to our Meditation.

First then, I am to expound and give the true Import of the Text itself; shewing What is here to be understood by *Christ's preaching unto the Spirits in Prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the Long-Suffering of God waited in the Days of Noah, while the Ark was a preparing.*

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Toward a clear Solution of this Text it will contribute very little to recount the many and various Interpretations, which have been given of them by Commentators on Holy Scripture. The doing this would be extremely tedious. And most of those, which are weak and ill-grounded, will incidentally be refuted under the *Second Head* of this Discourse. To give You therefore the true Sense of these Words, I shall expound them severally as they lie in the Text, and in the same Order, in which they are rang'd.

We are told then, that *Christ being put to Death in the Flesh, was quickened by The Spirit*. By *The Spirit* here we are to understand, Not the human Soul of *Christ*; (that could never be the Author and Cause of his Resurrection;) but, *The Holy Spirit* of God, or God *The Holy Ghost*. And this is agreeable to other Passages of Holy Scripture, in which the Act of Raising *Christ* from the Dead, is attributed to *The Holy Ghost*. So, in *Rom. i. v. 4.* it is said, that *Christ was declar'd to be the Son of God with Power by the Resurrection from the Dead, according to the Spirit of Holiness*. And indeed, not only the Raising *Christ* from the Dead, but even the Power of working his Miracles, and the Conducting and Guiding him during the whole Course of his Ministry, is, in Scripture ascrib'd to the Power of *The Holy Ghost*; yet so, as not

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to exclude that of the other Persons in The God-head.

To proceed; *By which also* (that is, by which Spirit, of whom we spoke before) *he went and preached.* The Original *Greek* hath it, *He going preached.* The Sense of this is no more than simply, that *He preached*; it being but an usual Idiom in the sacred Writings, as well as other Languages, to say *Go, and do thus*; when it is only intended, that the Thing should be done; and the Addition of the Word *Go*, is none other than an Expletive. So, in the Second Chapter to the *Ephesians*, vi. 17. speaking of *Christ* after his Departure out of this World, and his preaching thenceforward to the *Gentiles*, not in his own Person, but in the Persons of his Apostles, *St. Paul* tells the *Ephesians*, that *Christ* came, and preached Peace to them also, who were then afar off, as well as to them who were nigh. In this Text, the Expression of *Christ's Coming*, must necessarily be redundant, and be esteem'd a mere Expletive; because, it is certain that *Christ* never went to preach to the *Ephesians*, nor any *Gentiles* whatsoever. The *Going to preach* therefore, in this Text of *St. Peter*, and the *Coming to preach* in the Text to the *Ephesians*, must necessarily signify no more, than if it had been simply said, *He preached.*

To whom then did our Saviour thus preach?

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The Text goes on to tell us, that it was *to the Spirits in Prison*. But, Who are here to be meant by *the Spirits in Prison*, is the great Difficulty.

The *Romish* Writers will have it, that by *the Spirits in Prison* are to be understood, the departed Souls of those holy and pious Men, who liv'd before the Incarnation of our Saviour, and died with a full Assurance and Faith in a future Christ to be sent in God's appointed Time. Such were *Abraham*, and the *Patriarchs*; *David*, *Samuel*, and the *Prophets*; and indeed, all the righteous Persons who liv'd before the Gospel. They conceive, that the Souls of these good Men were preserv'd in a separate Place from that of others, in a Receptacle provided for them, to which they give the Name of the *Limbus* of the Fathers; that in the Space between his Death and Resurrection, our Saviour's Soul went to this Prison, — preach'd there to the Spirits of those righteous Men, — set them free from this their Captivity, — and carry'd them with him triumphantly into Heaven.

But all this is the mere Product of Fancy, and of Strength of Imagination. For, beside what I shall oppose to this Notion, when I come particularly to examine it under my Second general Head, — it is plainly confuted by the Text itself. It is there expressly said, that

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the *Spirits*, to whom *Christ* preached, were such as had been *disobedient*, and wearied out the *Long-Suffering of God in the Days of Noah*, and while the *Ark* was a preparing. So that these Words expressly restrain *Christ's* Preaching to the Age of *Noah*, — to those disobedient and impenitent Sinners, who were then alive, but afterward destroy'd by the Universal Deluge. It is to these that our Saviour is said to have preached; and consequently, it cannot be to the Souls of those holy and good Men, the Patriarchs, the Prophets, and such other righteous Persons, who had finish'd their Courses before our Saviour's Birth.

The Words therefore necessarily implying, that the Persons preach'd to, were that wicked Generation of Men, which were cotemporary with *Noah*, and whom the Flood destroy'd, We are next to Enquire, Why they are here entituled *the Spirits in Prison*.

To this it is truly said, that the *being in Prison* is an usual Way of Speaking in Scripture, to denote those Men who are either in Blindness and Ignorance of the true God, or else live a life enslav'd to Sin, in Captivity to Satan, tied down by the Chains of their own Lusts, and fetter'd with the Bonds of Vice and Iniquity. Persons in those unhappy Circumstances are very usually, and aptly describ'd in Scripture, as Men in Prison. So *Isaiah*, Cha-

pter 42. v. 7. introduces God The Father as speaking thus to his Son Christ, *I gave thee for a Covenant to the People, for a Light to the Gentiles, to open the blind Eyes, to bring the Prisoners out of Prison, and them that sit in Darkness out of the Prison House.* And again, Chapter 49. v. 9. *I will give thee for a Light to the Gentiles, that thou mayst be my Salvation to the Ends of the Earth; that thou mayst say to the Prisoners, Go ye forth.* And again, in the Sixty First Chapter of the same Prophecy, v. 1. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim Liberty to the Captives, and the opening the Prison to those that are bound.* Spirits in Prison then, being a frequent Expression in Scripture for such as are grossly ignorant of God, and who are immers'd in Sin and Corruption of Manners, it is very suitable, and easily applicable to that wicked Generation, which was swept away by the Flood, and which is represented as most consummately debauch'd, and to the last Degree vitious. So, in Genesis it is said, that all *Flesh had corrupted it's Way; that Wickedness was great upon the Earth; and that every Imagination of Man's Heart was only to do Evil continually.*

But, it will be said, that if by the *Spirits in Prison*, be understood That wicked Generation only, which was destroy'd by Noah's Flood, How doth it appear that Christ preach'd

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to them? or, What Ground is there to think, that *Christ* between his Death, and his Resurrection, visited and preach'd to that reprobate Set of People?

It is answer'd, that the Words of the Text do not in any wise confine this Preaching of *Christ* to the intermediate Time between his Death and Resurrection; nor indeed, to any one particular Time at all. It is only said in general Terms, and without Mention of any Time, that by the Power of the same *Holy Spirit*, by which *Christ* was raised from the Dead, he had sometime *preached to the Spirits in Prison*, (or that wicked Generation,) *which had been disobedient in the Days of Noah*. So that in the Text, here is no such Limitation, as is suppos'd, of the Time of this his Preaching to the Space between his Death and Resurrection; but it is sufficient, if at any Time whatsoever He preach'd to that Generation.

And, if it be farther demanded, When it was, that He did ever preach to that Generation; it is answer'd, that, forasmuch as any Person is very properly said to do that Thing, which another performs by Order, Authority, or Commission from him, our Saviour may truly be said to have preach'd to That Generation of Men, which liv'd before the Flood, inasmuch as He authoris'd several holy Persons to preach unto them, — to rebuke
P their

their Vices, and to forewarn them of the impending Deluge, which was to destroy them all unless they repented. Amongst the holy Prophets thus sent, was *Noah* himself; who is therefore in Scripture term'd *a Preacher of Righteousness*; and by *St Paul* to the *Hebrews* is said, *by his Faith to have condemn'd the World*. Such another Preacher was *Enoch*; a Part of whose godly Admonitions, is even yet extant in the Epistle of *St Jude*, v. 14. in these Words; *Behold, the Lord cometh with Ten Thousands of his Saints to execute Judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them, of all their ungodly Deeds, which they have ungodly committed; and of all the hard Speeches, which ungodly Sinners have spoken against him.*

Nor ought it to seem strange, that *Christ* himself should be said to have preached to the Ante-diluvian World, when He did so only by sending *Enoch*, *Noah*, and other righteous Persons to perform it; because the same Thing is in Scripture affirm'd of him with regard to other Men, whom yet he never preached to in Person, but only by his Substitutes. So in the before-mention'd *Second Chapter* of the Epistle to the *Ephesians*, v. 17. *St Paul* asserts, that *Christ came and preached Peace to the Gentiles which were afar off*. But, it is certain, that *Christ* never preach'd to the *Gentiles* himself; never went out of the Limits of *Judea*; never

never personally preach'd to the Heathens; but left that Task. to his Apostles and Ministers after his Ascension. With as much Reason, therefore, may *Christ* be said by *St Peter* to have preach'd to the Ante-diluvians in the Persons of *Noah*, and other righteous Men, commission'd to that Purpose, as He is by *St Paul* affirm'd to have done to the *Gentiles*, in the Persons of the Apostles, and the first Propagators of the Gospel.

From what hath been said then, we are now arriv'd at the true Import of this obscure Text; which, in brief, we have found to contain no more than this; That by the same *Spirit*, [the same *Holy Ghost*,] by which *Christ* was rais'd from the Dead, He had, at some Time, [not in the intermediate Space between his Death and Resurrection,] preached [Not personally, but by his Substitutes, *Noah* and others] to the *Spirits in Prison* [those wicked Men of that Age, Prisoners to Sin, and Captives to Iniquity,] which were disobedient, and had exhausted the Long-Suffering of God in the Days of *Noah*, while the *Ark* was a preparing, that is, the full Term of One Hundred and Twenty Years; For, so long we find from *Genesis* [Chapter 6. v. 3.] had been allow'd them by God for Repentance and Amendment. This seems to be the most consistent Exposition, which is given of this Text; and not so lyable

as others are, to Exceptions and Opposition.

I proceed now to my *Second* Head, which was to shew, how manifestly this Text is misapply'd by the *Romish* Church to support certain Doctrines of Faith, which she hath founded upon it.

Upon this Text, which I have now explain'd, The *Romanists* have establish'd no less than *Two* Points of Doctrine; the Belief of which they require as necessary to Salvation.

The *First* is, That our Saviour, whilst his Body lay in the Grave, actually descended into the local Hell; that There He preach'd to the Spirits of all the holy Men, who had liv'd before him; that these Souls He carry'd with him triumphantly into Paradise: And all this is infer'd from these Words of *St Peter*, that *He went, and preached unto the Spirits in Prison.*

The *Second* Doctrine, which they have built on this Text, is, That the Place to which our Saviour is conceiv'd to have gone, at his Descent into Hell, was that Part of it, (for they have very accurately, and ingeniously, without the Help of any Scripture, divided the infernal Regions into four different Quarters,) in which were reserv'd the Souls of such righteous Men, as died before *Christ* was born; and to which Quarter they have affix'd the Name of the *Limbus Patrum*, or the Region
of

of the Fathers. To this Part, they tell us, our Saviour went: And when he had preach'd to these Spirits, He took them all with him to Heaven; dispeopl'd all that Quarter of Hell; despoil'd it of it's Inhabitants: And ever since that Time it hath lay'n desolate and uninhabited.

In this Manner are the mere Inventions of Men impos'd on the World as Gospel-Truths; and thus the ignorant are prevail'd on to receive, as Points of Faith, what in Reality is Nothing but the Product of a working Brain, and fruitful Imagination.

But, for a general Answer to all this Fiction, it is sufficient to observe, that if the two former Propositions be Articles of Faith, and necessary to be believ'd in Order to Salvation, it is strange that they are not more clearly reveal'd in Holy Scripture; that they are not deliver'd more explicitly in other Parts of sacred Writ; that they are not confirm'd by Texts more obvious; but to be drawn out of this One Text; — and that too, by their own Confession, one of the most obscure and intricate in the Bible. Surely the Necessaries to Salvation ought, at least, to be clearly reveal'd, and be set in such a Light, as He that runs may read. The Goodness of God is concern'd to make those Things easy to our Knowledge, which He requires us to believe; and to give

us clear Means of Information, where our eternal Salvation is at Stake.

But, let us examine these Assertions more particularly. In the former it is averr'd from this Text, that *Christ*, after his Death, actually descended into Hell; that He there preached to the Spirits of all the holy Men who had liv'd before him; and, that after this Preaching, He carry'd their Souls with him in a triumphant Manner into his Kingdom of Glory. This is their first Doctrine: And the Words of our Text are always produc'd to support it. Yet, the Misfortune is, that the Text is so far from being able to support this Doctrine, that it is indeed directly opposite to it, and entirely refutes and overthrows it.

For, the Persons to whom *Christ* is here said to have preached, were, Not the righteous and holy Men, who had liv'd before *Christ*, and who dy'd in the Favour of God; but only That wicked Generation, *who had been disobedient in the Days of Noah*; and who had slighted *the Long-Suffering of God while the Ark was a preparing*. It was to These only that our Text confines this Preaching. Here is not the least Word to countenance the applying this Action to the Spirits of just Men; nor is there any Mention of any Delivery from this Prison, and a triumphant Entry into Glory subsequent thereunto. All this therefore falls
to

to the Ground as mere Fiction and Romance: Instead of Preaching to the righteous, the Text tells us, the Preaching was to the wicked and disobedient: And all that is added concerning a Delivery from this Prison, and of a triumphant Ascension, is quite beside the Text.

And as it is thus evident, that the Spirits to whom *Christ* is affirm'd by the *Romanists* to have preached, were not the Souls of the righteous Patriarchs, who had dy'd before his Incarnation; so there is not the least Foundation for any actual and local Descent into Hell, as they suppose our Saviour to have made.

For, as to the Souls of the righteous, they could not be ignorant of a Mediator and a *Messiah*, as having liv'd, and dy'd in full Assurance and confirm'd Trust in it. And, as to the Manifesting his Victory over Death and Hell, That was already finish'd and compleated by his Death on the Cross: And, Lastly, as to his Preaching to the damn'd, and converting them, it was now too late: They had been already condemn'd to everlasting Burnings; and were not to reap any Benefit from the Sufferings and Death of *Christ*.

The *Second* Point of Doctrine, which the *Romanists* advance upon this Text of Scripture, is, That among the infernal Regions one was allotted to be the Repository of the Souls of

such righteous Persons, as dy'd before *Christ's* Birth, (to which Place they gave the Name of *Limbus Patrum*, or the Region of the Fathers,) in which none other Souls were admitted; and which Place too our Saviour dispeopl'd, by carrying with him all those Souls triumphantly into Heaven.

But, This Opinion can no more be deduc'd from this Text, than the former could; and that too for the very same Reason: For, in this Text here is no Mention made, either of the righteous, or of the Place in which they reside. The Words confine all that The Apostle says to the Wicked only; and to those in particular which were of *Noah's* Time. These indeed are affirm'd to be kept in Prison: An Expression suitable enough to their Condition; and agreeable also to the Scripture-Language; wherein (particularly *Rev. 20. v. 7.*) the Place of the damn'd is call'd a Prison. But, the Place of the righteous is never in Scripture call'd a Prison; Nor can it properly be so call'd. A Prison supposes some Anxiety and Trouble: It implies such a Confinement, as which no Man would voluntarily enter, but is detain'd under by Force and Compulsion. But surely no Man will affirm, that the departed Saints suffer any Anxiety and Trouble; or are detain'd in their happy State by Restraint and Force.

Thus

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Thus our Text affirming, that the Persons Christ preach'd to, were the wicked Spirits, who confessedly never were in those suppos'd Regions of the Patriarchs; it follows, that the Existence of such Regions cannot be deduc'd from this Text of *St Peter*. And we may add to this, that all other Scripture is silent concerning this Doctrine; which surely it could not have been, had the Belief of this Article been necessary to Salvation.

Nay farther, there are other Passages in holy Writ, that seem to overthrow and entirely subvert it. Thus, when *Solomon* says, that immediately upon Death, and the Separation of Soul and Body, *the Spirit returneth to God who gave it*; This is plainly inconsistent with the Notion of any such separate Abode allotted in the infernal Regions to the Souls of the righteous; which, according to this Scripture, return to God who gave them; and, as the *Apocryphal* Writer, under the borrow'd Name of *Solomon*, expresses it, *The Souls of the righteous are in the Hand of God, and there no Torment touches them*.

From the Text thus explain'd, and thus vindicated from such false Glosses, as have been put on it to make it countenance false Doctrines, I am now, in The *Last* Place to close all, with laying before you a Proposition or Two both of Practice and Doctrine, which it impli-

implicitly contains and furnishes to our Meditation.

First then, it is observable, that this Text furnishes us with an irrefragable Argument against that Error of the *Socinians*, which consists in affirming that our Saviour *Christ* was not in Being till the Time of his Birth of the Virgin *Mary*; that He never had any Nature prior to that human Nature, which He took in her Womb; that He was no more than mere Man, and then began to exist when He was born in *Bethlehem*. This is the Opinion of *Socinus*, and of all his Followers, properly so call'd.

But, our Text contains a plain Refutation of this Notion: It affirms, (as it hath been before expounded,) that *Christ* sent *Noah* and other just Persons to preach Repentance to that Generation of Men, which were destroy'd by the Flood; and is, of Consequence, a Proof, that *Christ* was then in Being; or else, He could never commission and authorize any Men to exercise such an Office. *St Peter* in express Words avers, that *Christ*, by virtue of *The same Spirit, by which he was rais'd from the Dead, preached*, (or which amounts to the same, deputed others to preach) *to that Age of Men, which was disobedient in the Days of Noah, while the Ark was a preparing*. *Christ* then, must necessarily be in Being in the Time of *Noah*;

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Noah; and consequently, could not (according to the *Socinian Scheme*;) Then first begin to subsist, when He took Flesh in the Womb of his Virgin-Mother.

And indeed, the other Scriptures evidently teach us the same Thing: So *St Paul* in the *Tenth Chapter* of his *First Epistle* to the *Corinthians*, expounds the *Manna* shower'd on the *Israelites* in the *Wilderness*, and the *Rock* that gave them *Water* to quench their *Thirst*, to be Symbols of *Christ*; as the *Angel* going before the People of God in that their *Pilgrimage*, and tempted by them, was *Christ* himself.

And according to this Doctrine of the great Apostle, the ancientest, and best Interpreters of the Old Testament are unanimous in their Opinion, that wherever God is said in the Writings of *Moses*, to have appear'd to any Man, (as He did to *Abraham*, to *Lot*, to *Moses*, and many others,) it is always to be understood of God the Son, the Second Person in The *Trinity*; and that these his Appearances to mortal Men, were none other than fit and proper Preludes and Preparatives to that greater Manifestation, which He was hereafter to make of himself, when, in the Fulness of Time, He was to assume our Flesh.

A practical Inference may be drawn from that Part of this Text, in which Mention is made

made of the Forbearance and Long-Suffering of God toward that Race of Men, whose Wickedness had already made them ripe for the Divine Vengeance.

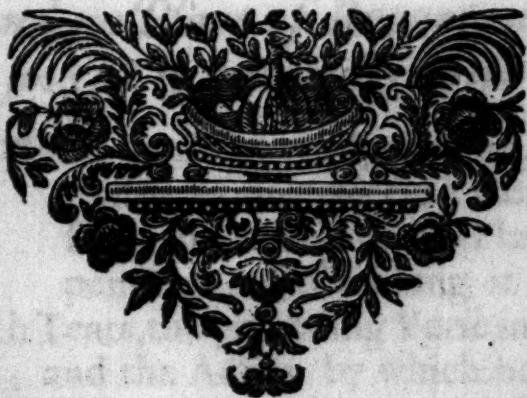
It was indeed an Age of consummate Wickedness; and *all Flesh*, (as it is describ'd in the *Sixth Chapter* of the *Book of Genesis*,) *had corrupted it's Way in the Sight of God*. To that Height was their Iniquity arriv'd, that it is said to have caus'd God *to repent that He had made Man on the Earth*: And the *Jewish Writers*, when they speak of this Generation, exclude it entirely from having a Share in the Life to come. Yet notwithstanding this Extravagancy in sinning, God did not immediately make bare his Arm, and pour on them the Vials of his Wrath; but mercifully allow'd them the Term of *One Hundred and Twenty Years* for their Repentance; in the mean Time sending righteous Persons to them, to admonish them of their Danger.

From this eminent Instance of God's Long-Suffering, we may make two very useful Inferences for our own Behaviour. The One, not to despair of Pardon, even tho' our Sins have been of long standing, and of the deepest Dye: For, by this Example we perceive, that Repentance is never too late, but will be accepted at all Times.

The

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The other Inference is, Not to go on in Sin upon a Presumption of the Long-Suffering of God, and trusting to the Security of a late Repentance. This is putting our Salvation to the extreamest Hazard; since, for any Thing we know, we may hereby become like the Wicked in my Text, and be overtaken by our Punishment before our Repentance is begun.



SERMON

The other inference is, Not to go on in sin
 upon a presumption of the long-suffering of
 God, and trusting to the security of a late
 repentance. This is putting our salvation in
 the uncertain Hazard, since, for any thing
 we know, we may hereby become like the
 wicked in my Text, and be overtaken by our
 iniquities before our Repentance is begun.

And this is the reason why we must not
 be content with a late repentance, but must
 be diligent to keep our hearts from
 being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
 For the wrath of God is kindled against
 all such who are so careless of their souls,
 as to live in sin, and to neglect the
 work of grace in their hearts. And therefore
 we must be diligent to keep our hearts
 from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,
 and to be diligent to keep our hearts
 from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

SEMON
 The tenth sermon of the series, in which
 the author treats of the necessity of
 a late repentance, and the danger of
 trusting to the security of a late
 repentance. The sermon is divided into
 three parts. In the first part, the author
 shows that a late repentance is necessary
 for the salvation of the soul. In the second
 part, he shows that a late repentance is
 dangerous, because it is often delayed
 until it is too late. In the third part, he
 shows that a late repentance is necessary
 for the salvation of the soul.

SERMON X.

HEB. XII. 17.

*For ye know, how that afterward,
when he would have inherited the
Blessing, he was rejected; for he
found no Place of Repentance, tho'
he sought it carefully with Tears.*

THE Person here spoken of, and describ'd as one rejected from a Blessing, and as finding no Place of Repentance, tho' seeking it carefully and with Tears, the preceding Verse informs us, is *Esau*; and the Action by which he fell into these unhappy Circumstances, was, by selling his Birth-right for one Morsel of Meat.

The historical Account both of the Manner of his selling his Birth-right to his Brother *Jacob*, and his being afterward depriv'd of his Father's Blessing, (both which are here alluded to,) may be read at large in the 25th and 27th Chapters of the Book of *Genesis*: And these are Matters of Fact too well known to be re-
counted

counted in this Place; tho' perhaps, in the Sequel of this Discourse, and in the Clearing the Interpretation of this Text, I may find myself necessitated to touch on some Parts of it.

But, the immediate Motive of my chusing these Words for the present Subject of Discourse, is, that as they contain some little Difficulty and Obscurity, (which, I hope, will hereafter be satisfactorily clear'd up,) so this suppos'd Difficulty hath been, and daily is, the Source and Fountain of great Inconveniency and Prejudice to those who read, but do not thoroughly understand them.

The Generality of Readers, (especially the more superficial and careless ones,) finding in these Words, an Instance and Example of a penitent, contrite Person, rejected from a Blessing, finding no Place for Repentance, and deny'd Acceptance, tho' seeking it with Tears, do from hence draw a Conclusion (fatal in it's Consequences, and in the highest Degree Prejudicial to their eternal Interests,) that God is Not at all Times ready to accept the Repentance of a Sinner; that He sometimes shuts the Door of his Mercy even against a sincere penitent; and excludes from Salvation; not only the desperate and harden'd Sinner, but also the reform'd and converted Supplicant.

How apparently these Words are misapply'd to

Sermon the Tenth.

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to support this Conclusion, and how groundlessly and unreasonably this Position is infer'd from them, will hereafter be fully shewn, when I shall lay before you their proper, genuine and natural Import. It will then be made appear, that our Text hath no Manner of Reference to a Repentance toward God, or a Sorrow for our Sin; but relates only to one particular Transaction between *Esau* and his Father *Isaac*; and consequently, are very wrongly apply'd to the general Dispensations of God toward Sinners; a Subject altogether foreign to their Intent and Meaning.

In the mean Time, the Necessity and Usefulness of explaining this Passage, and vindicating it from this common, but mistaken Interpretation, will be render'd most apparent, when we reflect, what a Train of ill Consequences this Suggestion carries with it; what a Dishonour it reflects on God; and what endless Anxieties and Fears it must produce in the Consciences, not only of the worst, but even of the best of Men.

For, To insinuate, that God will not accept a Sinner upon his sincere Repentance; that He shutteth up his Bowels of Compassion, and will not forgive the prostrate penitent, is to cast the greatest Dishonour on that distinguishing Attribute, his Mercy; It is, to suppose him implacable; and not to practise in his

own

own Person, what he strictly enjoins us to exercise, Pardon and Forgiveness.

Under what more unbecoming Notion can we represent the Divine Being to our Understandings, than the being relentless and unmerciful, — delighting in Vengeance, and pleas'd with the Destruction of a World devoted to Suffering? Can we imagine that God hath any Pleasure in the Death of him that dyeth; or that the Torments of other Beings add a Relish to *his* Happiness and Enjoyments? This were to conceive of our God as the ancient Heathens did of theirs, that He is easily provok'd, and under Provocation implacable; that He is rather an Enemy than a Friend to our Species; and that the True God, like their *Moloch*, is not to be appeas'd but by our passing thro' the Fire.

Add to this, that this Suggestion [of God's Unwillingness to receive all penitents] is not only the greatest Derogation from the Value and Merit of that Satisfaction for Sin, which his Son hath made on the Cross, (which, upon this Supposition, is not esteem'd so meritorious by his Father, as to make a perfect Reconciliation for sincere penitents;) but it is also directly opposite to those many positive and exprefs Declarations, which he hath in Scripture given us, of his never-failing Mercy, — of his Readiness to forgive, — and of his Arms

Arms being continually open, and extended to receive a returning Sinner. All the Assurances of this kind, which we meet with in his reveal'd Will, (and they occur in almost every Page of that reveal'd Will,) are but so many Delusions, if the pretended Suggestion of this Text be true, that God refuses the returning Sinner.

View this Suggestion in another Light, and we shall find it no less melancholy and uncomfortable with relation to ourselves, than it hath been shewn to be dishonourable to, and detracting from God.

With what Horror and Despair must this Doctrine fill our Minds, if ever it be admitted and receiv'd as a Truth? What Reflection can we suggest to a broken Heart, and a wounded Spirit, but the Consideration of the unbounded Mercy of God, our Father? What Comfort hath a dying Bed; What Thoughts can relieve the Agonies of approaching Dissolution, but the Relyance on, and Trust in a merciful Judge? What Motive so effectual, and conducive to the reclaiming the profligate and abandon'd, as, that it is never too late for Repentance; that God is ever willing to receive him; that He hath not totally cast him off; but earnestly tenders him forgiveness upon Condition of Reformation? How truly lamentable is the Condition of a Sinner, who is

perswaded of that gross Error, which hath been founded upon, and is pretended to be agreeable to, the Case of *Esau*, as it is stated in this Text. The Belief of having no Room for Repentance, is one of the most tragical Positions, that can possibly enter into the Heart of Man. A Criminal under an irretrievable Sentence of Judgment, is but a faint Copy, and distant Resemblance of him. The Pains of Hell are already begun in him: He hath a bitter Foretaste of that Cup, which must follow; and anticipates, and partakes in a groundless Fear of, what the damned Spirits are now actually suffering. In brief; To advance such Doctrines, as are false in themselves, but pretended to be countenanc'd by Scripture, is a laying on Burthens too heavy to be born; It is making that *Yoke* of God grievous which He himself hath pronounc'd easy; and an Endeavour to draw Falshood from the very Fountain of Truth itself.

To shew that this Passage of Scripture is thus perverted, I shall, in this Discourse, take the following Method.

First I will explain this Text, and at large shew the true Import of it; that from thence You may be enabl'd to judge, how greatly it hath been misunderstood, and how apparently it is misapply'd, when it is urg'd as a Proof, that Repentance is not always effectual to Forgiveness;

giveness; or, that God will not, at all Times, accept a sincere Penitent.

Secondly, I shall prove, That this Suggestion, of God's Unwillingness to forgive, is not only Not deducible from this Case of *Esau*; but also, directly contrary to the whole Tenour and Drift of many other Parts of Scripture.

Thirdly, I shall endeavour to return Answers to some other Arguments, which have been urg'd in Behalf of this false Position; and by which it hath been affirm'd, that God will not forgive the Sins of some Men.

Lastly, from the Whole I shall draw a suitable Inference or two, which will offer themselves to our Consideration from the Subject before us.

First then, I undertake to explain this Text, and at large to shew the true Import of it; that from hence You may be enabl'd to judge, how greatly it hath been misunderstood, and how apparently it is misapply'd, when it is urg'd as a Proof, that Repentance is not always effectual to Forgiveness; or, that God will not, at all Times, accept a sincere Penitent.

They, who from this Passage of Scripture, and from the Case of *Esau* represented in it, do infer, that God sometimes is deaf to Repentance, and will not accept a Convert, as

they suppose *Esau* to have been; are led into this Mistake, by their taking it for granted, that all that is here said of *Esau*, of his being rejected, of his *finding no Room for Repentance*, tho' he sought it carefully with Tears, is to be understood to have pass'd between God and *Esau*; and, as if it signify'd, that, penitent as he was, God rejected him, God deny'd him Repentance, and God refus'd him a Pardon for his Sins.

But, all this Supposal is a wide Mistake, and a Misunderstanding of the Text. There is not the least Ground for asserting, that this Rejecting of *Esau*, was from God; or, that God was at all concern'd in any Part of the Transaction here alluded to. The Name of God is not once mention'd in this whole Affair: Nor is it so much as hinted, that it was God who rejected him, and that deny'd him Repentance. And therefore, the interpreting this Text is so far groundless, as it supposes and introduces God as bearing a Part in this Matter.

But it will be said; If it was not God, that thus rejected *Esau*, Who then was it that rejected him? It is plain, by the Text, that he was deny'd the Blessing, — that he found no Room for Repentance. And if it were not God, who deny'd him, Who else can be said to be thus relentless towards him?

It is answer'd, That by looking into the Con-

Context, and by considering the History of *Esau's* being deny'd the Blessing of his Father *Isaac*, which had fraudulently been obtain'd before him by his Brother *Jacob*, we shall find that the Rejecting of *Esau*, (which is here spoken of,) and the Denying Room for Repentance, was the Act of his Father *Isaac*, and Not of God; of whom (as I said before,) here is not the least Mention.

In the Verse immediately preceding my Text, and which is the *Sixteenth* of this Chapter, *Esau* is styl'd a *Profane Person*, as having sold his Birth-right for one Morsel of Meat. *Profane* (say the *Jewish* Writers,) because, together with his Birth-right, and as a Part of it, he sold also the Priesthood to his Brother; (The Officiating before God in Holy Things, being always the Privilege of the First-born in the Family, till the Time that God instituted the Priesthood of *Aaron*;) And therefore, *Esau* was *Profane* in this Sale made to his Brother, in that he tacitly undervalu'd, slighted and contemn'd that Sacred Office, which was an Adjunct of his Birth-right.

Thus far our Text plainly alludes to what is at large related in the *Twenty Fifth* Chapter of *Genesis*, of *Esau's* selling his Birth-right to his Brother *Jacob* for a Mess of Pottage. What follows, as plainly alludes to what we read in the *Twenty Seventh* Chapter of the same Book,

re-

relating to *Jacob's* fraudulently obtaining his Father's Blessing, by an Artifice of his Mother; and the Behaviour of *Isaac* consequent thereupon, in refusing to revoke that Blessing, in Favour of *Esau*, tho' intreated so to do, by the Cries and Tears of *Esau*.

So we read, [Gen. 27. v. 33.] that when *Esau* had prepar'd and brought his Venison to his Father, *Isaac* in great Surprize demands, *Who, where is he, that hath taken Venison, and brought it me, and I have blessed him? Yea, and he shall be blessed. And, when Esau heard the Words of his Father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter Cry, and said unto his Father, Bless me, even me also, O my Father. And he said, Thy Brother came with Subtilty, and hath taken away thy Blessing: Behold, I have made him thy Lord, and all his Brethren have I given to him for Servants; and with Corn and Wine have I sustain'd him. And Esau said, Hast thou not reserv'd a Blessing for me? Hast thou but one Blessing? Bless me, even me also, O my Father: And Esau lift up his Voice, and wept. And all the Blessing he at last obtain'd, was no better than, By thy Sword thou shalt live, and shalt serve thy Brother.*

This being the Fact which our Text alludes to, I presume there doth not need any other Comment to explain it's Meaning. We cannot Now be at a Loss, in what Sense *Esau*

was

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was rejected, when he would have inherited a Blessing; and, in what respect he found no Place of Repentance, tho' he sought it carefully with Tears.

The Repentance, which could not be found, was, as You must perceive, Not in the Person of *Esau*, (for he was truly Penitent; he was sorry for the loss of his Birth-right; and gave sufficient Proof of it in his Tears, his Cries, and his bitter Lamentations;) but the Repentance, — or rather, the Change of Mind, or the Alteration of his Purpose, (for so the Word here used [*μετανοία*] doth most properly signify,) was not to be found in *Isaac*. It was he, who continu'd inflexible, who adher'd to his first Blessing bestow'd on *Jacob*, and from which he could not be diverted by *Esau*, notwithstanding his Supplicating it with Cries and Tears.

Thus have we attain'd the full Import of our Text. It alludes only to the Case of *Esau* and his Father *Isaac*: The former had profanely sold his Birth-right; And when his Father had ignorantly (but yet by the Direction doubtless of Providence,) confer'd the Blessing on his younger Brother, — *Esau* would have inherited that Blessing, by perswading his Father to revoke it: but, in this, was rejected; he found no Place of Repentance, (i.e. no Change of Mind, no Alteration of Resolution and Purpose

pose in his Father *Isaac*,) *tho' he sought it carefully with Tears*; or, as it is express'd in *Genesis*, *with great and exceeding bitter Cries*.

This being the only Scope of the Text, we are now enabl'd very easily to judge, how widely this Passage of Scripture hath been misunderstood, and how apparently it is misapplied, when it is urg'd as a Proof, that Repentance is not always effectual to Forgiveness; or, that God will not, at all Times accept a sincere Penitent. There is not here the least Mention, either of God, or of sincere Penitents, or of the Dealings of God with such Penitents. All that is here affirm'd, is, that when *Esau* would have intreated *Isaac* to revoke the Blessing which he had unwittingly confer'd on *Jacob*, and to confer it on Him, *Isaac* obstinately refus'd it: He would not be prevail'd on by the Tears and Intreaties of *Esau* to change his Purpose: He would not repent, or alter his Mind as to what had been done, but was deaf to the most earnest Desires of *Esau*.

But, how this Piece of History can support the before mention'd Proposition; or be urg'd as a Proof, that God will not always receive a penitent Sinner, is surely unintelligible. These are Things of very different Natures, and have no Kind of Relation to each other: And the Argument to this Purpose (if it may

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be call'd by that Name,) must be fram'd thus;
 "Isaac would not revoke the Blessing given
 "to Jacob, tho' Esau earnestly intreated him
 "with Tears; therefore, and with the same
 "Reason, God will not always accept of Re-
 "pentance, nor Repentance be always effe-
 "ctual to Forgiveness. But, what a loose,
 and fallacious Way of Arguing is This; and
 how incapable is the Proof of supporting the
 Conclusion drawn from it?

2. I proceed now, in the Second Place, to
 prove, That this Suggestion of God's Unwil-
 lingness to forgive, is not only not deducible
 from this Case of Esau, but is also directly
 contrary to the whole Tenor and Drift of
 many other Parts of Scripture.

That God will at all Times receive to Mer-
 cy a sincere Penitent; that we are never too
 late for Pardon; and that there is no such
 Time, when Repentance will be ineffectual to
 Remission, is One of those Truths, which is,
 in the fullest Expressions, and in the clearest
 Terms, reveal'd in holy Writ.

In The Old Testament how often are we
 told, that *whenever the wicked Man turneth
 away from his Wickedness, and doth that which is
 lawful and right, he shall save his Soul alive?*
 How often are the Children of Israel, after
 all their Back-slidings, and provoking Abomi-
 nations, call'd on in the tenderest Expressions,
 and

and the most affectionate Strains, to return to their God, who was ready to receive them? Why is Repentance universally recommended, the Exhortations to it so press'd, and repeated, and the Practice of it enforc'd on every single Sinner without Exception, if it be not effectual to every such Sinner without Exception? How vain are all Encouragements to a forsaking of Sin; How absurd all Inducements to a Newness of Life, if God hath determin'd not to accept the Repentance of Some Sinners, or a Newness of Life be ineffectual to Forgiveness.

But so far is God from this Unwillingness to forgive, that Our Saviour hath told us, That God is always ready to forgive our Sins, whenever we practise the same Forgiveness to those, who have offended us; That God will regulate his Mercies in the Remission of our Sins, according to that Measure which we ourselves act by towards our offending Brethren; and that he hath made our Readiness in forgiving Others, the Rule and Standard in forgiving us. At the same Time that *Christ* made this Declaration, he also enjoyn'd us to forgive our Brother's Trespases, even until *Seventy Times Seven*. If then God's Readiness to forgive, be to keep Pace with, and be proportion'd to Our's; it is most certain, that he must be always ready to forgive; and that the

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Number of our Sins (provided our Repentance be sincere,) is no Bar to his Mercy.

The Position, of God's universal Acceptance of the Penitent, is warranted by Examples also drawn from Scripture, as well as the express Assertions we there meet with. There is not one Instance in the whole Scripture of a sincere Penitent, excluded from Forgiveness, excepting this of *Esau*, sometimes alleg'd as such, but how unjustly, hath been made appear already. On the contrary, every such Person is there represented as receiv'd graciously; and none as condemn'd, but those who dy'd; as they liv'd, impenitent, obstinate, incorrigible. We have Instances of Sins of the deepest Dye, of the most flagrant and enormous Guilt, which have been expiated by a sincere Repentance.

The Case of *St Peter* is a most undeniable Proof of this Matter, and gives us clearly to understand, not only that Acts of wilful Sin, and Habits of the same, do not put us beyond the Hopes and Possibility of Mercy, but also, that even Apostacy itself, (if it be not total, fix'd, and confirm'd,) is remissible to Men. That Apostle, thro' the Infirmary of human Nature, had deny'd his Master, disown'd his Knowledge of him, and had confirm'd and gain'd Credit to it by Oaths, Curses and Imprecations. Yet, God did not so desert him, as entirely to give him up. His Grace still wrought

wrought in him. His Repentance and Tears gain'd the Favour of his Lord: And he was fully restor'd to that blessed State, from which he had fallen.

The incestuous *Corinthian*, who gave Occasion to St Paul to write his Epistle to that Church, is another Instance, that the greatest of wilful Sinners is capable of God's Mercy, and not to be excluded from the Hopes of Pardon, as hath been infer'd and believ'd from this mistaken Case of *Esaú*. That Person had been guilty of such a Sin, as, St Paul tells us, had not been nam'd even among the most profligate Heathens: Yet, That wholesome Severity and Discipline, which that Apostle us'd towards him, in laying him under the Censure of the Church, and denouncing him excommunicate, had so good an Effect, that it brought him to a Sense of his Guilt, awaken'd him to Repentance; and That was follow'd by an Absolution from St Paul, and a Restoring him to the Privileges of a Christian.

And the same Method he advises his Son Timothy to use [2 Tim. 2. 25, 26.] telling him that The Servant of the Lord must in Meekness instruct those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them Repentance to the Acknowledging of the Truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the Snare of the Devil, who are taken Captive by him at his Will.

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To go yet farther; Wilful and habitual Sins are yet pardonable, not only in private Men, and in single Instances, but also in collective Bodies, and the greatest Numbers. Thus, The Holy Spirit of God writes to the back-sliding Church of *Ephesus*, [*Rev. 2. 5.*] to remember from whence she was fallen, and to repent, and to do her first Works; And we are farther told, that all manner of Sin shall be forgiven unto Men.

Indeed, when we reflect on that Satisfaction for Sin, which hath been made by The Son of God, we must necessarily suppose it to be sufficient to atone for all Men: Otherwise we must impeach The Divine Wisdom in that whole Dispensation; in providing an Attone-ment, which is not sufficient; in sacrificing The Son of God for an End, which is not compleated; and imposing on him a Task, to which He was altogether unequal. But, so far (to our Comfort) is *Christ's* Satisfaction from being unable to reconcile to God the greatest of Sinners, that we have Assurance from God himself, that *His Blood cleanseth us from all Sin*; — that *The Lord hath lay'd on him the Iniquities of us all*; that *He gave himself a Ran- som for all*; — that *He died for the whole World*; that *He hath reconciled God unto the World*; — that *God deliver'd him up for us all*; and, that if any Man sin, we have an Advocate with
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The Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and He is the Propitiation for our Sins.

These several Passages are Demonstrations, that God both can and will forgive us all, even the greatest Sins; that we are never in that State, suppos'd to be mention'd in the Text, when God will reject our Repentance; there being no Such State, in which we may not repent, and in which, of consequence, we may not be pardon'd. Whenever the Prodigal Son shall return, his Father will, with open Arms, receive and embrace him; And, *at what Hour soever a Sinner repenteth there will be Joy in Heaven, and in the Presence of the holy Angels.*

3. I proceed now to my Third General Head; which was, To return Answers to some other Arguments, which have been urg'd in Behalf of that Position, which I have hitherto oppos'd; and by which it is affirm'd, that God will not forgive the Sins of some Men.

In Opposition to the Doctrine of the universal Acceptance of a Sinner's Repentance, which I have hitherto defended, and which hath been shewn to be not at all impeach'd by the Example of *Esau* mention'd in the Text, it is asserted, That the Scripture, in several Places, makes mention of Some Sins, which are Not to be forgiven, and of Some Sinners, who shall never be accepted.

Of

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Of the former, they give an Instance in the Sin of Blasphemy against The Holy Ghost, which Our Saviour himself hath pronounc'd irremissible, declaring [Matth. 12. 31, 32.] that The Blasphemy against The Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto Men; and that, whosoever speaketh against The Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this World, neither in the World to come.

As an Instance of the latter, (i. e. of Sinners who shall never be accepted,) they produce the Assertion of St Paul [Heb. 6. 4, 5, 6.] where the Apostle says, It is impossible for those, who were once enlighten'd, and have tasted of the heavenly Gift, and were made Partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the Powers of the World to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again to Repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves The Son of God afresh, and put him to an open Shame. To which they add these Words of the same Epistle [Ch. 10. v. 26, 27.] If we sin wilfully after that we have receiv'd the Knowledge of the Truth, there remaineth no more Sacrifice for Sin, but a certain fearful Looking for of Judgment to devour the Adversary. From these Texts it is infer'd, that there are some Sins in their Nature irremissible, and that those who commit them will never be accepted of God.

It is answer'd, That by the Sins mention'd

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in these Passages of Scripture, describ'd in the former Text by *Blasphemy against The Holy Ghost*, and in the latter by *Falling away, after having tasted the heavenly Gift, and been made Partakers of The Holy Ghost*, is to be understood, Not every Kind of willful Sin into which Men fall, nor any Habit of Sin, usually and frequently practis'd by the unrighteous, but only, a total Apostacy, and obstinate Revolt from the Faith in *Christ*; a Deserting the whole *Christian Religion*, contrary to the Perswasions of our Consciences; and an Embracing *Heathenism*, or *Judaism*, whilst inwardly convinc'd that *Christianity* is of Divine Original.

Such an Apostacy as this, is the Sin describ'd in these Texts. And indeed, it is very certain, that this is a Sin, which can never be forgiven; Because, if the Apostacy be total, the Revolter must dye under that Guilt; and consequently, cannot hope for Salvation, as expiring under a Guilt, which can never be repented of.

But, tho' all this be true, yet it doth not at all affect the Truth we are defending, namely, that God will always accept a sincere Penitent; — because, in the Instances here alledg'd, the Offenders are suppos'd to dye impenitent. In the Sin against *The Holy Ghost*, the guilty Person cannot live to repent; For, if he ever

repent,

repent, his Apostacy was not total, but only for a Time; And therefore this Instance is very foreign to the Purpose for which it is urg'd; it being absurd to endeavour to prove, that Repentance is not always effectual to Forgiveness, by bringing Instances of such Sins, where the Repentance is impossible. The Sin against *The Holy Ghost* is therefore unpardonable, because it cannot be repented of. But surely every Man must see, that this is no manner of Proof, that a Sin, which is actually repented of, may yet not be forgiven; or, that God will exclude a sincere Convert.

I hasten, in the Last place, to draw a suitable Inference or two, which will offer themselves to our Consideration from the Subject before us.

First then, from what hath been said in the explaining our Text, and shewing that the Case of *Esau*, mention'd in it, is very far from giving any Countenance to that Interpretation, which is usually put upon it, viz. That tho' he repented of his Sin, and with Tears begg'd a Place of Acceptance, yet God rejected him, deny'd to accept him, and shew'd no Mercy on him; And that God uses other Sinners with the same Rigour and Severity. — Let the guilty Sinner, and the affrighted Conscience, which supposes itself to be in the same Circumstances, be comforted with this Reflection,

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That the Fears from this Text are groundless and imaginary. Let None suppose themselves to be in the same unhappy Condition, as *Esau* is usually conceiv'd to have been; since it hath been shewn from the Word of God, that neither was *Esau*, nor can any other Person be in such a State of Guilt, in which Repentance is too late, or Reformation ineffectual. Let the Sinner reflect, that there is but One Sin only which renders our Condition truly desperate; and That is such, as I hope none of us are in any Danger of committing; — a total and perpetual Apostatizing from the Faith of *Christ*, which we profess'd at our Baptism. This is the only Sin mention'd in the whole *Christian* Revelation, which, in the natural Course and Order of it, is for ever unpardonable. All other Sins, of what Nature soever, do not put us out of Covenant with God; But, whilst we retain the Principles of our Religion, and hold fast the Faith in *Christ*, so long we are assur'd, that, upon our true Repentance, God is willing to receive us to Forgiveness. Let not then, either the Number of their Sins, or the Lateness of their Repentance drive any Men to Despair; Because, if they steadily perform at last the Conditions of this Covenant, Faith and Repentance, they shall undoubtedly find the *Christian* Dispensation, what St *Paul* hath truly styl'd it, a *Ministry*, and a *Word* of *Reconciliation*.

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Secondly, If, as hath now been prov'd, God be ever ready to receive a sincere Penitent, Let this Consideration have that Weight and Influence on us, as to produce in us this blessed Change of Manners. If He impatiently expects us, why do we longer hold back and refuse him? Will a Criminal rather dye, than apply for a Pardon, which may be obtain'd with Ease? Common Prudence might instruct us, (whether St *Paul* had ever made the same Inference or not,) *That the Goodness of God should lead us to Repentance.*

Lastly, Whilst we are thus justly celebrating the unbounded Extent of God's Mercy towards penitent Sinners, let us be careful not to forget, that He is likewise equally just and severe towards all Men, who are Not thus penitent. These latter have no Claim to the Mercy of God, but are the proper Objects of his avenging Justice. Let us therefore, whilst it is in our own Power to chuse either Mercy or Judgment, behave ourselves wisely; and with the penitent *Mary*, *chuse that better Part, which shall not be taken away from us.*



SERMON

Secondly, It is said, how been proved, God
 he ever ready to receive a sinner's repentance. Let
 his Consideration have that Weight and In-
 fluence on us, as to produce in us the blessed
 Change of sinners. If He impartially ex-
 pects us, why do we longer hold back and re-
 fuse him? Will a Criminal rather die, than
 apply for a Pardon, which may be obtained
 with ease? Common sense might suggest
 it. Whether St. Paul had ever made the same
 inference or not, I leave the Goodness of God
 to judge in his own way.

Thirdly, Whilst we are thus fully celebrating
 the unbounded Extent of God's Mercy towards
 penitent sinners, let us be careful not to for-
 get, that He is likewise equally just and se-
 vere towards all Men, who are not thus pe-
 nitent. These latter have no Claim to the
 Mercy of God, but are the proper Objects of
 his avenging Justice. Let us therefore, whilst
 it is in our own Power to choose either Mercy
 or Judgment, behave ourselves wisely; and
 with the penitent Man, cast that better Part,
 which shall not be taken away from us.

And now, O ye that are called to this
 Feast of Repentance, let me beseech you, that
 ye will not be content with a partial Repen-
 tance, but will strive to be perfect in the
 Love of God, and of our Neighbour.

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SERMON XI.

ROM. III. 28.

Therefore we conclude, that a Man is justify'd by Faith, without the Deeds of the Law.

THE Words of this Text seem, at first View, to present us with a Proposition very strange, and surprising. Their literal Interpretation seems to hint, That a bare Faith in *Jesus Christ*, (for, some Copies of The New Testament read it, *That a Man is justify'd by Faith only*,) — or, an Acknowledgment of his being The *Messiah*, and *That Prophet*, who had so long been promis'd to the *Jews*, is sufficient to justify us in the Sight of God, and to purchase an Acquittance from all Guilt from Him, without our observing the Deeds of the Law; without the Practice of the moral Precepts; and without the Exercise of Virtue and Holiness.

According to this Supposition, Good Works are not absolutely and essentially necessary to

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Salvation; are no Part of the Condition, on which we are to be justify'd; will avail nothing towards our final Acceptance with God: But Faith alone is to bring about that happy Event. It will not, according to this System, be enquir'd at the last great Day, how upright our Behaviour hath been, but how strong our Faith: We shall not be arraign'd on our Actions and Conduct, but on our Perswasion and Belief.

It will be the Business of my Discourse hereafter to shew, how wide this Interpretation is from the Sense of St Paul, the Author of these Words; how destructive of all Morality; how inconsistent with the whole Tenor of all those Passages of Scripture, which encourage and recommend Holiness of Life and Uprightness of Manners, as necessary to Salvation; and how contrary to the Doctrine of other Parts of sacred Writ, relating to the Terms of our final Justification.

In this Place however, it may not be improper to observe, into what dangerous Consequences this mistaken Interpretation of St Paul, concerning *Justification by Faith*, exclusive of Good Works, hath led it's Assertors; how fatally they have been deluded by this false Perswasion; and how grossly they have impos'd on themselves in this most important Point, on which no less depends than their eternal Salvation.

In

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In the Age of the Apostles themselves there arose a Sect of Men, whose Numbers made no inconsiderable Figure; (great Pretenders indeed to extraordinary Illuminations, and more than common Gifts of Knowledge in the Mysteries of their Religion,) who, as is most probable, understanding this Passage of *St Paul* in the Sense, which at first Reading it seems to carry, preach'd up the No-Necessity of Good Works in order to Salvation; discarded Holiness from being a Condition of Justification; and taught and inculcated, that a Faith alone in *Jesus Christ* is sufficient to reconcile us, and to make us acceptable to God.

In Consequence of this Position, they took the Liberty to discharge Men from all Obedience to the Laws of God; from all Obligations to a good and virtuous Life; and introduc'd such a Corruption of Manners, such Libertinism, Debauchery and Immorality, as not only render'd them a Shame to that holy Name, by which they were call'd, but also gave too obvious an Occasion to the Enemies of *Christianity* in general, to wound and reproach that Religion, which they thus dishonour'd by their Practice.

The Persons I am speaking of, were, that large and spreading Sect of the *Gnosticks*; of whose enormous Impurities, and most scandalous Libertinism, (the natural Consequence of

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of their mistaking the Sense of *St Paul* in this Text,) so particular Accounts are transmitted to us, in the remaining Writings of the eldest *Christian Authors*.

St Peter is, with very good Reason, suppos'd to have had in his Eye this licentious Body of Men, when speaking in his *Second Epistle*, Chap. 3. v. 15, 16. of *Some things hard to be understood* in the Writings of *St Paul*, (amongst which a principal Place is due to this of Justification,) he affirms, that *they who were unlearn'd and unstable had wrested them, as also the other Scriptures, to their own Destruction*.

But, the Holy Spirit of God did not content itself with this Reprimand from *St Peter*; The before-mention'd Principle of Justification by Faith alone, and the No-Necessity of Good Works thereto, being now promoted by a great Body of Men, and the tempting Doctrine being admitted by great Numbers of Profelytes; it was necessary, that the Truth should be more explicitly discover'd; that God should declare himself more openly on that Subject; and that some inspired Writer should set Men right in their Notions, and determine this Controversy for succeeding Ages.

Accordingly, *St James* set himself to write his Epistle almost entirely on this Subject: in which, and particularly in the *Second Chapter*, he strenuously opposes himself to this pernicious

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cious Doctrine; He copiously asserts the Insufficiency of a bare Faith to our Justification; He expressly declares, that *without Works our Faith is dead*; that a bare Assent to, and Belief of the Gospel Truths, is not sufficient to Salvation, because *the Devils also believe and tremble*; He tells us, that *it profiteth Nothing to have Faith, and Not Works*; He calls those *Vain Men*, who can receive that Perswasion; and, by the Instances of *Abraham* and *Rahab*, confirms his Doctrine of the Necessity of Good Works in Conjunction with Faith.

After this inspir'd Apostle *St James* had thus explicitly, and with no Room for further Doubt, stated this Doctrine of the Necessity of Good Works; and thereby fully shewn us, How we are to understand *St Paul* in my Text, (namely, that by *Faith* he means an operative Faith; and by *the Deeds of the Law*, no more than *the Ritual Injunctions of the Law of Moses*, as will hereafter more fully appear;) it might reasonably have been expected, that The Attributing our Justification to *Faith* only, would have found no more Patrons and Advocates; but that the Necessity of Good Works also would have been universally allow'd. Yet, this hath not, in all Ages, been the Consequence and Event.

There are, and have been great Numbers of *Christians*, who do still interpret *St Paul's* Words

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Words in my Text, in the most literal Sense; and, who earnestly contend, that we may be justified by Faith only, without looking on Good Works as a necessary Qualification. They affirm, that the *Faith*, here mention'd by Saint *Paul*, and to which he attributes our Justification, is Not such a Faith as necessarily implies the Fruit of Good Works, — but supposes no more, than a well-grounded Assent. And, they maintain, that by *The Deeds of the Law*, (without which St *Paul* here affirms a Man may be justified,) may well enough be understood the Moral Duties of *Christianity*, and the several Virtues, which Religion requires us to practise.

These are the Principles of those Men, who assert Justification by Faith alone, according to Their Misunderstanding of St *Paul's* Words: And, upon a Presumption of the Truth of this Scheme, they have ventur'd to affirm, that a Sinner may be justified, merely upon a confident Perswasion of his being in a State of Grace and Favour with God.

This being a Principle, which subverts all the Fences of Morality, and which, we may justly apprehend, hath had a large Share in introducing that open Impiety and Profaneness, for which the present Age is so justly infamous; I have made Choice of these Words for your present Meditation: In discoursing

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on which, I hope I shall not only explain, and clear this Text from the Difficulties under which it seems to lie, — but also, shall shew, that it gives no manner of Countenance to that Opinion, which some Men have founded on it, [that we may be justified by a bare Faith, without Good Works;] and consequently can be of no Service, either to the Doctrines and Tenets of the *Antinomians*, or to the Licentiousness and Debaucheries of the *Libertines*.

To this End the following Method seems best suited, and adapted;

First, I will State and Explain the true Import, and Sense of St *Paul* in the Text, by comparing it with the Context, — the Scope of the whole Epistle, — and with other Passages in this Apostle's Writings. From all which it will appear, that St *Paul*, by a justifying Faith, doth Not mean, a Faith not accompanied with Good Works; but, such a one only, as is productive of them; and that, in this respect, there is no real Difference between St *Paul* and St *James*, in the Article of Justification, tho' the former attributes it to Faith only, the latter, to Faith in Conjunction with Good Works.

Secondly, I shall from hence take Occasion to rectify some Other Mistakes, which are by some *Christians* entertain'd, relating to our being justified before God.

Lastly,

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Lastly, I shall improve the Whole into a few Directions of a Practical Nature; and shew the Influence it may have on our Lives and Conversations.

In the First Place then, I am to State and Explain the true Import and Sense of *St Paul* in the Text, — by comparing it with the Context, — the Scope of the whole Epistle, — and with other Passages in this Apostle's Writings. From all which it will appear, that *St Paul*, by a justifying Faith, doth Not mean a Faith not accompanied with Good Works; but, such a one only, as is productive of them; and, that in this respect, there is no real Difference between *St Paul* and *St James*, in the Article of Justification, tho' the former attributes it to Faith only, and the latter to Faith in Conjunction with Good Works.

To clear *St Paul's* Sense in this difficult Text, and which, thro' Men's not rightly understanding it, hath been brought to patronize Errors, of very fatal Consequence relating to their moral Behaviour, the properest Method is, to Enquire into the Scope and Design of the whole Epistle; and from thence we shall be enabled to judge of the Author's Intention.

The Design therefore of *St Paul's* writing this Epistle to the *Romans*, was, To obviate and refute a Mistake, into which many of the *Jewish* Converts had fallen; and which indeed
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their great Reverence and Regard for the Law of Moses, under which they had been bred, gave Rise and Occasion to: And That was, that, notwithstanding their being Profelytes to *Jesus of Nazareth*, and their being within the Pale of the *Christian Church*, — notwithstanding their firm Belief that He was the promis'd *Messiah*, they were still under Obligation to the *Mosaick Law*, still bound to Circumcision, the Sacrifices, and other Rites of the Legal Dispensation. They could not be perswaded, that *Christ* had abrogated all these; that these *Types* were vanish'd by the Appearance of the *Antitype*; but imagin'd, that the Works of the Law were even now necessary, in Order to their final Justification before God.

It is this mistaken Principle, which *St Paul* opposes throughout his whole Epistle to the *Romans*: And the same is the Drift and Tenor of his Epistle to the *Galatians*: In both these He asserts, that we cannot be sav'd, or justified by the Deeds of the Law of *Moses*, as a Mean, in it's own Nature, capable of recommending us to the Favour of God. He labours to prove, that the Law of *Moses* never could, and therefore cannot now, perfectly reconcile us to God, or offer a compleat Expiation for Sin.

Upon this Occasion, and to make it yet clearer, that there is no such Necessity of ob-
serving

serving the Law of *Moses*, in Order to a Justification before God, the Apostle goes farther back, and argues, from the Case and Example of *Abraham*, that Justification may be obtain'd without the Legal Performances. Upon this He shews, that *Abraham* was accepted of God, had *Righteousness* imputed to him, and was call'd the *Friend of God*, before the Ordinance of Circumcision was given him, and merely upon Account of That Faith, which he had in the Promises of God. What God had promis'd him, He believ'd He would assuredly accomplish: Upon a firm Trust in these Promises, he obey'd the Command of God in leaving his native Country; and this his Faith and Obedience, God imputed to him for Righteousness, and freely accepted him to Justification.

From this short Account of *St Paul's* Intention in writing this Epistle, You will easily perceive, What it is that he means, when in the Text he declares, *that a Man is justified by Faith, without the Deeds of the Law*. It is evident, that he principally and primarily, in this Place, intends, Not the *Christian* Law, but the Law of *Moses*, against which he had all along been arguing, as a Mean insufficient to Justification: They are the Deeds of the *Mosaic* Law, which he represents as ineffectual to Salvation; and, it is against Them chiefly, that all, here said, is levell'd and directed.

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I have said, That *St Paul's* Principal Intention in this Place, was, to exclude from a Power of Justifying, the Works of *Moses's* Law; because, tho' that was primarily his Design, yet it is worth our Remembrance, that even the Works of the Gospel, (by which I mean the whole Circle and Compass of *Christian* Duties,) will not be sufficient to justify us, or make our Salvation certain, if we rely on them alone, as the meritorious Cause of it. For, tho' we esteem the Practice of *Christian* Virtues to be one necessary Condition to our being acquitted before God, yet we are not so to rely on them, as if these alone would be effectual; but they are to be join'd to a Rational, and well-grounded Faith.

There is indeed, properly speaking, but One meritorious Cause of our Justification; and that is, The Sufferings, the Obedience and Death of our Great Lord and Redeemer, *Jesus Christ*. The Faith, and Good Works that are requir'd from us, are more properly Conditions, and Terms which are expected at our Hands, and by which alone we are intitled to the Benefit of *Christ's* Redemption. The Sufferings of *Christ* may therefore truly be call'd, the Consideration, on which we are justified; as our Faith and Works may be call'd the Conditions of it.

Hitherto I have explain'd the latter Part of
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the Text; and have found, that *the Deeds of the Law*, which St Paul excludes from a Power of Justifying, are Not the Deeds of the *Christian*, but those of the *Mosaick Law*; and Consequently, no Countenance is, by this Text, given Either to the Doctrines, or Practices of such Vicious Men, as indulge themselves in all Sensualities, upon a Presumption that Good Works are not necessary to Salvation; but that Faith alone is sufficient thereto, as it seems to be hinted in the former Part of this Text; Of which I am, in the next Place, to give a Solution.

The Apostle indeed affirms, in express Words, that a Man is justified by *Faith*. But, from what hath been already observ'd it appears, that the Faith by which it is here asserted, that we may be justified, is Not such a Faith as is oppos'd to the Deeds of the Gospel, but only to the Deeds of the Law. It is not here said, that Faith will justify us without the Practice of the *Christian Virtues*; but only, that Faith will justify us without the Practice of the *Mosaick Institutions*. A wide Difference is here to be made between Faith, as it is barely contradistinguish'd to the *Jewish Dispensation*, and the same Faith, when contradistinguish'd to the Exercise of the *Christian Moral Duties*. The former is the Sense in which St Paul here uses the Word *Faith*; and not at all, as it is oppos'd

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oppos'd to the Practice of *Christian* Virtues. By the Faith therefore, to which *St Paul* here ascribes a Capacity of our being justified, we must necessarily understand such a Faith, as is operative, — as is productive of Good Works, — and, as includes the Practice of the whole Complex of *Christian* Duties; and Not only a bare Belief, or an Assent of our Minds to *Jesus's* being *The Christ*, (which hath been affirm'd, from this Text, to be sufficient to Salvation;) because, this very Apostle, in other Parts of his Writings, is so far from teaching, or allowing, That a bare Faith in *Christ*, Not accompanied with Good Works, is sufficient to save us, that indeed, not any One of the Writers of the New Testament, no not even *St James* himself, (the great Patron of Works, and of their indispensable Necessity,) hath carried the Necessity of them higher than *St Paul*, or insisted with more Warmth on their being absolutely requisite to our Salvation.

Thus, in his Epistle to the *Hebrews* he tells us, that *without Holiness no Man shall see the Lord*. In other Places he acquaints us, that *God will render to every Man according to his Deeds*; — that *we shall receive for the Things done in our Bodies, whether they be good or bad*; and that *whatever a Man soweth, that shall he also reap*. In other Parts of his Epistles he hath laid be-

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fore us many and long Catalogues of great and enormous Sins; telling us, that those who are guilty of them, *shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.* A very evident Proof, that it was never his Opinion, that Faith without Works could justify us before God. Hence also it is, that he tells us, [*1 Tim. 4. 8.*] that *Godliness hath the Promise of the Life that now is, and of that which is to come.* These are Demonstrations of St Paul's Judgment on the Subject before us.

There is yet remaining one more infallible Proof, that by justifying Faith, in this Text, St Paul cannot intend such a Faith, as is not productive of good Works, but must mean by Faith the whole Complex of *Christianity*. This is taken from a Passage in the *Thirteenth Chapter* of his *first Epistle to the Corinthians*, v. 2. where he acquaints us, that *Tho' he had all Faith, so that he could remove Mountains, yet if he had not Charity, he should be Nothing.* This is plainly intimating, that Faith alone, however lively and strong it may be, will not be rewarded with eternal Glory, unless join'd to Good Works, of which Charity is the Chief.

And it is observable, that St Paul not only makes Use of the Terms [*Faith,*] and [*the Obedience of Faith,*] as Words of the same Import and Signification, but also, when in other Places he comes to describe his justifying Faith, he

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he explains it in such a Manner, as to include Works in it. So, to mention none other, he tells the *Galatians* [Ch. 5. v. 6.] that in *Christ Jesus neither Circumcision availeth any Thing, nor Uncircumcision, but Faith which worketh by Love.*

What hath been said is sufficient to shew, that *St Paul*, by a justifying Faith, in this Text, doth not intend a bare inoperative Faith, but such a Faith as includes the Practice of Good Works. And from hence, we are easily furnish'd with the Means of reconciling *St Paul* with *St James* in this Article of Justification; whose Assertions in that Matter were long look'd on as irreconcilable, and directly opposite to each other. *St James* ascribes Justification to our Works, and warmly inculcates the Necessity of these, in Opposition to a dead and inoperative Faith: *St Paul*, on the other hand, was esteem'd, from this Text, to have taught, that a Man may be justified by Faith only. But, from what hath been observ'd, it is evident, that the Faith to which *St Paul* ascribes Justification, is a lively, operative Faith; a Faith that exerts itself in Good Works, and is productive of all *Christian Virtues*. And it is the same Faith which *St James* also requires, telling us, that *Faith is dead being alone*, — that *the Devils also believe and tremble*, and that *by Works a Man is justified, and not by*

Faith only. So that what St Paul ascribes to a Faith suppos'd to be *operative*, St James denies to That only, which is *inoperative*.

Thus have I clear'd and vindicated this difficult Text of St Paul; and shewn that it will not bear that Sense, which some mistaken *Christians* have put on it; viz. that a Man may be justified by *Faith* separate from *Good Works*; by which they have open'd a Door to the Commission of all Kinds of Wickedness, and taught Men to be secure in their Licentiousness and Debauchery.

I am now, in the Second Place, To rectify some other Mistakes, which are by some *Christians* entertain'd, relating to our Justification in the Sight of God.

These, as they are maintain'd by the Church of *Rome*, have of Consequence many Defenders, and a large Body of Patrons; but, like the other Errors of that Church, are so gross and palpable, that barely to mention them, is almost a sufficient Refutation of them.

The One is, that good Works are not only necessary to our being justified, (in which we agree with them,) but also, that they are in themselves, and for their own sakes *meritorious*. They tell us, that our good Works carry in them that intrinsic Merit, and Condi-gnity, that eternal Salvation is but a just Debt due to them; that we may, upon this Account, right-

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rightfully and boldly lay Claim to an eternal Reward; that they make God become our Debtor; and that it would be Injustice in him to defeat us of his Glory.

In Answer to this unwarrantable Pretension, We aver, that tho' the Practice of good Works, be One Condition necessary to our final Justification, yet We cannot ascribe such a Merit to them, as to render eternal Life no more than a Debt, of Justice belonging to them. We think, that our best Actions are no more than our bounden Duty and Service. And surely we can never be imagin'd to have any Right, any Claim of our own to a Reward for *That*, which by Duty we were oblig'd to perform.

We conceive, that all our good Services are but Debts to the Almighty; Debts, which from thenceforward became incumbent on us, when We receiv'd from him our Life, our Being, our All. We conceive also, that as our good Actions do not proceed originally from ourselves, — are not the Effect of any internal Principle of our own, but are the Fruits of Divine Grace, and result from the Operations of *The Holy Ghost* within us, — so it seems altogether unreasonable to claim a Reward, and to challenge Salvation as justly due to Actions, which confessedly proceed Not from ourselves, but from that *Father of Light, from whom every*

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good and perfect Gift cometh. We think Saint Paul's Expostulation in a like Case, very just, that since We have received it, we ought not to glory as tho' we had not received it.

Again; We think we cannot be said to merit a Justification upon the Score of our good Actions, because they are not perfect, nor entirely holy. We believe, that even our best Actions have some Mixture of Imperfection; and that there is always, even in these, Room enough for The Almighty to display his Mercy in Pardoning. We are but too sensible of the Truth of what the Prophet *Isaiah* so passionately laments, that *We are all as an unclean Thing, and that all our Righteousnesses are as filthy Rags.* What Actions then can we perform, that shall be meritorious of a Reward, when even our best stand in Need of a Pardon? Surely it cannot be true, that at the same Time we may merit a Reward for doing a Thing well, and yet deserve Punishment for doing it no better.

Lastly, to this arrogant Position We oppose, that our good Works cannot be said to merit eternal Life, because of the great Disproportion, which there is between the Actions and the Reward. Nothing, certainly, can merit what exceeds the Proportion of it's own Worth. A finite Action cannot, in Nature, challenge an infinite Reward. And therefore,
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Eternal Life cannot be esteem'd a commensurate Debt, or bear any Proportion to the Virtues which we practise. In a Word, Since God hath declar'd it to be his Pleasure, that He will mercifully accept us to Salvation, upon our Performance of these Conditions, viz. Faith and a good Life, it is our Duty thankfully to receive the Favour; but still to acknowledge it to be, (what in Truth it is,) gratuitous and undeserv'd.

A Second Erroneous Tenet of that Church in this Article, is, what they usually call a Sacramental Justification; by which they mean, that the bare Use of the Sacraments only, even tho' receiv'd with very slight Acts of Sorrow, Contrition and Repentance, is a sufficient Mean of Justification, and renders all our other Actions compleat and perfect. Strange this! that but a Part of our Duty, but a single Branch of Religion, and that too negligently, carelessly and imperfectly perform'd, should be thought sufficient to justify us, when the whole Complex of Religion, the whole Circle of Duties, and the Practice of every Virtue, is confess'd to be no more than One of the Conditions of Salvation, and what requires the Conjunction of Faith with it in order to be effectual. Can it be thought, that a single Part of our Duty can effect, what the Whole Duty of Man can go but half Way with?

with? Surely, upon this Scheme, the *Pharisees* were right, when they taught the *Jews* of old, that if they strictly observ'd but One Point of the Law, God would easily forgive the Breaches of all the rest.

I shall now proceed, in the Last Place, to improve what hath been said, into a few Directions of a practical Nature; and shew the Influence it may have on our Lives and Conversations.

And here, in the first Place, let me earnestly caution You against that Notion, which too many *Christians* have fatally imbib'd from their unwary Interpretation of this Text, (whose genuine import I have now explain'd to You,) and who have thereby been led to think, that they shall be sav'd by *Faith only*; forgetting that Admonition, which the same *St Paul* hath elsewhere given them, namely, *to add to their Faith Virtue, and to Virtue Knowledge*, and the like moral Qualities.

Indeed, if an Estimate were to be made of Men's Opinions from their Practices, — if we might argue from their Behaviour to their Tenets and Perswasions, we might justly suspect that the Bulk and Gross of Mankind were far gone in these Sentiments; and entirely of Opinion, that their Faith alone would save them. The general Depravity and Corruption of Manners now reigning amongst us, would

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would almost tempt one to believe such a Suggestion. But, I am perswaded *better Things of You, and that Ye have not so learnt Christ*. Let us not so grossly impose on ourselves in an Affair of this Consequence; Let us not suffer ourselves to be so absurdly cheated; nor think our Saviour's Yoke to be more light and easy than it is.

Faith in the Matters of Fact deliver'd in the Scriptures, is so far from being a Mean in it's own Nature capable of justifying us, or of rendering us, on it's own Account, acceptable to God, that in Truth, it seems difficult to want, or be without it. The Proofs and Evidences of the Truths of the *Christian Religion* are cogent and irresistible; and an honest, unprejudic'd and unbiass'd Mind cannot oppose itself to, or disbelieve them, without doing Violence to it's Reason and Understanding. There is therefore, very little Merit in Faith consider'd abstractedly from good Works; the Propositions requir'd to be receiv'd, being as proveable in their Way, as *Geometrical* ones are in their. *Christianity* is not so much a speculative, as a practical Religion: It was given us, Not so much to improve our Notions, and furnish us with sublime Ideas, as to rectify our Morals, and reform our vicious Courses. And, as it is thus the End of our Religion to encourage Morality, Let us take the greatest Care

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Care not to admit such Doctrines, as effectually tend to undermine and subvert it.

But, whilst we are thus pressing the Practice of good Works, and urging them as necessary to eternal Salvation, Let us be careful, on the other hand, not to rely too much upon them; not vainly to confide in them; not to ascribe any real Merit to them; not to boast of them before God; nor groundlessly presume on their suppos'd Condignity to reconcile God to us. Let it be remember'd, that tho' we should be able (what no mere Man ever yet did) to practise perfect Holiness, or to perform a sinless Obedience, we are still to call ourselves unprofitable Servants, as having done no more than it was our Duty to do. The Merit of our good Actions, (if in any Sense that Name may be applied to them,) is due, Not to ourselves, but to the Operation of the Divine Grace in us, and to the Motions of *The Holy Ghost*. It is He, who is the prime Principle, the first Mover, and the most immediate Cause of all our Virtues: And therefore, to him only should we ascribe the Honour of them.

We are told by Revelation, as well as inform'd by sensible Experience, that *we are not able to think any Thing as of ourselves, but that all our Sufficiency is of God*. It is *He that worketh in us to will and to do of his good Pleasure*: And, *We are his Workmanship, created by God*

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unto Good Works by Christ Jesus. Let God therefore, have the Glory of all our Virtues; and let not Man boast, who hath so small a Share in the Victory.

Lastly, as it hath now been shewn, how absolutely requisite to our Salvation is a Faith exerting itself in good Works, let us be careful to maintain and guard the former, and be diligent and active in the Pursuit of the latter. Let our good Actions proceed from an internal Purity and Holiness; — from an hearty Sense of our Duty towards a beneficent God; — and from That Submission, which we owe him as our Sovereign Lord and Master. Let our Virtues stand as clear as possible from all Self-Interestedness, and carry no allay of private Views. Let all Hypocrisy and Ostentation, all Vanity and spiritual Pride, be banish'd from them. There are great Varieties of Circumstances, any of which will render our best Actions unacceptable to God: Let all these be avoided. And then, when we have done our best, a gracious God will overlook our unavoidable Imperfections. The Merits of *Christ* will supply the Want of Merit in ourselves; and obtain for us those Rewards, which we are unable either to describe, or to conceive.

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SERMON XII.

R O M. VIII. 16.

*The Spirit it self beareth Witness with
our Spirit, that we are the Children
of God.*

THE Author of this Epistle, after having in his former Chapters evinc'd the main Principle and Design which he had in View in writing it, (namely, that the Works of the Law of *Moses* cannot justify us in the Sight of God, but that this can only be done by such a Faith in *Jesus Christ*, as is productive of good Works,) proceeds, in these latter Chapters, to lay before us the great Priviledges which are given us by the *Christian* Dispensation, superior to those of *Moses's* Law, and which are proper and peculiar to this last and best Covenant.

Amongst these, he more particularly insists on the valuable Helps and Assistances, which we receive from *The Holy Spirit* of God, and by which He furthers and promotes the great Work of our Salvation. This Consideration
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is the Subject of a great Part of the Chapter, from whence my Text is taken; in which he observes at v. 9. *That if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in us, we are then not in the Flesh, but in the Spirit: That if we have not the Spirit of Christ, we are none of his: That if the Spirit of him, that raised up Jesus from the dead, dwell in us, he that raised up Christ from the dead, shall also quicken our mortal Bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in us: That as many as are led by the Spirit of God, are the Sons of God: That we have not received the Spirit of Bondage again to Fear, but we have received the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father: And, That if by the Spirit we mortify the Deeds of the Body, we shall live.*

Upon this Occasion of enlarging on the many good Offices, which we receive from The Spirit of God, he goes on to run a Comparison between the evil Effects and Consequences of the Flesh, and those advantageous ones of the Spirit, as they are oppos'd to each other. He observes, that as these two Principles are the Influencers and Conductors of every private *Christian*; And as every Man gives himself up to be led by the One or the Other, so their respective Tendencies are very different, and the Consequences, in which they terminate, of a directly contrary Nature. The One Principle of Action leads Men into the Practice
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of all Purity and Holiness; The Other immerges them in Impiety and Uncleanness. *They that are after the Flesh, saith he, v. 5. do mind the Things of the Flesh; but they that are after the Spirit, the Things of the Spirit.*

And as their Practices are thus different, the Consequences arising from them must be so likewise. For, he tells us, *v. 6. and onward, To be carnally minded is Death, but to be spiritually minded is Life and Peace. The carnal Mind is Enmity with God; for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be. They who are in the Flesh, cannot please God. And, if we live after the Flesh, we shall dye; but, if thro' the Spirit we mortify the Deeds of the Body, we shall live.*

But, tho' these Considerations are of great Weight, and Moment to us, and ought to encourage us in the Pursuit of our Duty in all it's Branches, yet there is One Consolation more, which we may derive from *The Spirit* of God, and which flows from Him as it's Fountain; and that is, That Testimony and Assurance, which he gives us, which he imparts to our Minds, and which he communicates to our Knowledge, that we are in a State of Favour and Acceptance with God; that he looks on us as his own Sons, and hath received us as Heirs of his Promises by Adoption.

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This Testimony of *The Holy Spirit*, imparted to God's faithful Servants, is what *St Paul*, in the Text, makes express mention of, telling us, that *The Spirit itself* (i. e. *The Spirit of God*, or, *God The Holy Ghost*) *beareth Witness with our Spirit, that we are the Children of God*; And, in the preceding Verse, that *we have received the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.*

What this Testimony of the Spirit here mentioned, is; What Nature it is of; In What manner it is convey'd; and What Degrees of Assurance we may found upon it, shall be the Business of my present Discourse largely and explicitly to lay before you. In this Place only it may be proper to take Notice, that it is probably the same Action with that which is mention'd in other Parts of Scripture, and attributed to *The Holy Spirit*, under the Name and Title of *Sealing* us to Salvation. So in the *first Chapter* to the *Ephesians*, v. 13 &c. *St Paul* speaks of our being *seal'd with that Holy Spirit of Promise, which is the Earnest of our Inheritance, until the Redemption of the purchas'd Possession, unto the Praise of the Glory of God.* In the *Fourth Chapter* of the same Epistle, v. 30th, he cautions us *not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by which we are sealed unto the Day of Redemption.* Again, in the *Second* to the *Corinthians*, (Ch. 1. v. 22.) he tells us, that

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God hath sealed us, and given us the Earnest of The Spirit in our Hearts. And Lastly, in the Fifth Chapter of the same Epistle, at Verse the fifth, he affirms, that God hath given us the Earnest of the Spirit. All these Expressions here us'd, of our being sealed by the Spirit, and receiving Him as an Earnest, and Pledge of our Salvation, are no more than explicative of what, in the Text, is call'd, *The Witness of The Holy Spirit, in Conjunction with our Spirit, that we are the Children of God.*

The Doctrine therefore, which results from these Passages of Scripture, is This; That God doth often send his *Holy Spirit* into the Hearts and Minds of his faithful and true Servants; by which *Holy Spirit* they have a more certain and solid Assurance, (which may be call'd *an Earnest, a Token, or Pledge,*) that they are in a State of Favour and Acceptance with God; and, if they persevere in well-doing, that they shall finally be sav'd; Or, to give you the Doctrine in other Words, That, when Men become truly perswaded, that the Promises of God contain'd in the Holy Scriptures, shall be fulfill'd in the Salvation of the Faithful; — and, in Consequence of this Faith, do sincerely endeavour to please him in all good Works, that such his Servants may not faint in well-doing, may not stagger in their Faith, nor draw back from Piety and Virtue, God sends into
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their Hearts the Influences of his *Holy Spirit*: This is given them as a Token and Pledge: By this they have sure Evidence that God hath adopted them for Sons, and made them Heirs of eternal Life; By This He seals and confirms to them his Promises, and gives them an Assurance of their future Salvation.

This is the plain Doctrine resulting from these obscure Passages of Scripture; A Doctrine, which as it hath been but seldom treated of, and generally not well understood, I shall take this Opportunity to explain it, as far as the Holy Scripture gives us an Insight into it.

The Motives to my so doing are considerable and weighty. For, as this Doctrine concerning the Assurance of their Salvation, which the Faithful receive from *The Spirit* of God, is very full of spiritual Consolation, if rightly understood, and prudently apply'd; so the Mistakes and Errors, into which Men easily fall with relation to it, have produc'd very ill Consequences in the Minds and Consciences of those misguided *Christians*.

To be assur'd by the infallible Spirit of God, and to receive this Divine Testimony, that we are in a State of Salvation, — that God hath adopted us for Sons, — and that the Crown of Glory must assuredly be our Portion, is certainly the greatest Comfort, that can be obtain'd on this Side the Grave; and can be exceeded

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ceeded only by the actual Enjoyment hereafter of what we have here this Foretaste and Assurance. The Certainty of our being the adopted Sons of God, the declar'd Heirs of Bliss, and elected by our heavenly Father to the Glory that shall hereafter be reveal'd, is the most ravishing Prospect that can lie before us, and must raise our Imaginations to the highest Felicity. In the Pursuit of our Duty, and in the Exercise of good Works, it is a great Encouragement to us, that we have the very Hopes of being sav'd, and even a Chance for Eternity. How much more comfortable must it be, to receive an Earnest of it from God, and to have the Testimony of *The Holy Spirit* to put us beyond all the Fears and Apprehensions of losing it!

But, as comfortable as this Doctrine is, when rightly understood, and prudently apply'd, the Mistakes and Errors, into which Men are liable to fall with relation to it, are no less fatal and dangerous; and, no Doubt, have prov'd destructive to a great Number of Souls.

For, some good Men, who have endeavour'd to live in such a manner as to be acceptable to God, — and, upon that account, have been apt to think well of themselves, being withal Men of warm Imaginations, and lively, sanguine Constitutions, have been induc'd to believe, that they have obtain'd this Testimony

of *The Holy Spirit* to their Salvation, — have concluded, that They have receiv'd this Testimony from God, — and are possess'd of this Token and Pledge of Felicity. Upon this vain Presumption, and upon no better Grounds than the Suggestions of a lively Fancy, they have been fatally misled into Sloth and Security; have grown remiss in their good Works; and have miss'd of Salvation, merely by an over-sweating Confidence of being in that State already.

On the Other hand, Some good Men, being of a more melancholick and phlegmatick Temper, and in whose Constitutions Fear is the most predominant Passion, not finding in themselves, (after all their good Works, and notwithstanding their Endeavours to please God in all Things,) these Assurances from *The Holy Spirit* in their Hearts, nor being conscious of this Evidence from God, are thereby tempted into the opposite Extream of Despair; are led to think, that they are not in the Favour of God, nor in a State of Salvation; and that, notwithstanding their good Endeavours, they shall finally perish, because destitute of any Token of Approbation from God.

Upon these Accounts it is become highly useful truly to State this Doctrine, concerning *That Witness, which the Holy Spirit gives of*

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our being the Children of God; both that this Truth, so little understood by the Generality, of *Christians*, may be render'd, (as it really is) a Matter of Consolation, and Joy to us; and that all Mistakes in it, (which are so highly dangerous to Men's Salvation, as well as destructive of their inward Peace of Mind,) may be rectify'd and obviated.

In Order to these Ends I shall take the following Method;

First, to shew the Nature of that Testimony, or Witness, which *The Spirit* is here said, in Conjunction with our own Spirit, to afford us, that we are the Children of God. I shall explain, under this Head, What this Evidence is, and Wherein it consists.

Secondly, I shall enquire into the Degrees of Certainty, which this Testimony gives us; How far we may safely rely on it; and What Measures of Assurance of Salvation we may securely raise on it.

Lastly, from the whole Subject, I shall draw a few practical Inferences; and improve it into some Directions for our Conduct and Behaviour.

In the First Place then, I am to shew the Nature of that Testimony or Witness, which *The Spirit* is here said, in Conjunction with our Spirit, to afford us, that we are the Children of God; and under this Head to explain,

What this Evidence is, and Wherein it consists.

The Nature of this Testimony of *The Holy Spirit* to our being *the Children of God*, doth Not consist, (as some Enthusiasts, and they too of our own Nation have suppos'd,) in any internal and actual Voice and Oracle from *The Holy Ghost*, assuring them that their Sins are forgiven, — that they are in a State of Perfection, — that they are above a Capacity of Sinning, — and that they cannot fall from Grace. Such Suggestions as these, to which our *Quakers* pretend, are more likely to proceed from Evil Spirits, in order to seduce Men into a blind-fold Security, than from *The Spirit* of God, who always urges Men to Perseverance. The express Voice of, [*Son, be of good Cheer, thy Sins are forgiven thee,*] hath never been directed to any Person whatsoever since the Time that The Lord of Life, (*who only hath Power to forgive Sins*, and to pronounce them forgiven,) hath left this Earth. This Method therefore, cannot be the Testimony of *The Spirit* alledg'd in the Text; Both because it hath no Foundation in, or Warrant from Scripture; and is so apparently unsafe, and dangerous to be rely'd on.

Nor farther, are we to found this Testimony of *The Spirit* merely on the Reports of our own Judgments, or rely on those Intelligences,

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gences, which we may receive from our own Understandings. Our Self-Love and Fondness, and that partial View in which we ever see our own Actions, may impose on our Conceptions, and become a false Guide to us. It is very possible that our Thoughts may incline us to believe, that we are possess'd of this Witness, and that *our Hearts may not condemn us*; and yet, at the same Time, *God may condemn us, who is greater than our Hearts, and knoweth all Things*. Prejudices and Passions, Fancy and Affection, Error and Illusion, may be, and often are mistaken for the Suggestions of God's *Holy Spirit*; and under that View, pass into our Judgments, and lead us to Destruction. It is very possible, that we may take Boldness for Peace, unreasonable Confidence for certain Security, and an Hardness of Heart for Strength infus'd into us by *The Holy Ghost*. Our Understandings may say, Peace, Peace, when there is no Peace; and the Waters of the Sea may be much troubl'd, when it's Waves do not cast up Mire and Dirt. Ignorance of our Duty, Negligence in performing it, Temper and Natural Constitution, Humour and Complexion, have all, in their several Ways, a considerable Effect and Influence on our Judgments: And therefore, it cannot be safe to repose Confidence in the Reports merely, which our Judgments make, relating to our being

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being possess'd of this *Witness of the Holy Spirit, that we are the Children of God.*

Nor, Lastly, is it safe to acquiesce in the Reports of our Consciences relating to this Matter. These indeed are not altogether so liable to Error, as our mere Judgments are; but may be suppos'd to be more faithful and impartial in their Accounts. Yet, even these, in some measure, follow the natural Temper of Men, and make the more favourable, or more dreadful Reports, as their Owners are more, or less inclin'd to be sanguine or melancholy. Upon this Account, our mere Consciences cannot be safely depended on in an Affair of this Consequence, Whether we have this Testimony of *The Spirit*, or not.

And, with respect to the Insufficiency of both these Evidences, of our Judgments, and Consciences, it must further be observ'd, that the Text tells us, that the Witness which *The Holy Spirit* gives of our being the Children of God, is a Witness distinct from that, which our own Spirit, (or, our own Judgment and Conscience,) gives; and which is suppos'd to be join'd with, and confirmative of our own Spirit. *The Spirit*, it is said, *beareth Witness with our Spirit*. So that here are plainly imply'd Two distinct Testimonies, The One, which is given by *Our Spirit*, i.e. by our Judgments and Consciences; The Other, by *The Spirit of God*, agreeing and

consenting thereunto. For this Reason therefore, the Reports of our Judgments and Consciences, cannot be judg'd to be the same with the Testimony of *The Spirit*, because, upon this Supposal, this would in Fact, be but One Testimony; which yet the Text hath declar'd to be double, and to proceed from Two distinct Principles and Spirits.

But, it will be ask'd, If this Testimony of *The Spirit* to our being *the Children of God*, be not convey'd to us by an internal Voice, nor can safely be collected from the Perswasions, Either of our Judgments or Consciences, (as it hath been shewn it cannot,) After What Manner then are we to collect, and be assur'd of it? and by What Signs will it appear, that we have this Testimony?

It is answer'd, that there is but One certain Sign, and but One infallible Token, that we have this Witness from *The Spirit*, *that we are the Children of God*; and that is to be taken from the Fruits of *The Spirit*, or from that Faith and Holiness, which He produces in us. If the Course of our Lives, and the Tenour of our Actions be such, as is agreeable to that Guidance and Direction, which *The Holy Spirit* should have over us, we may be assur'd, that we have his Evidence, and may safely depend on it, that we are *the Children of God*. If we steadily pursue our Duty, strictly adhere to
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Virtue, and allow ourselves in the Practice of no known Sin, we may be confident that so long *we are the Children of God*, and have the *Seal of The Holy Ghost to the Day of Redemption*. Our Actions therefore, are the only Tests of this Witness of *The Spirit*: The Presence of *The Spirit* can be only known by it's Fruits: And if the Effects of *The Holy Ghost*, (i.e. sound Faith, and sincere Holiness) be wrought in us, we may be assur'd, that with the Evidence of our *own Spirit* we have that of God's likewise.

It is vain and absurd to imagine, that we can be seal'd to Salvation by *The Spirit of God*, at the same Time that our Works are directly contrary to *The Spirit*. If we will believe St *John*, *He only is righteous, that doth Righteousness*; and, if ever *The Holy Spirit bear Witness that we are the Children of God*, it can only be at those Times, when we are discharging towards God the Duties proper to Children, Filial Love, Imitation, and Obedience.

The plain Exposition then of this difficult Text amounts to this; *The Spirit of God*, (that is, the Fruits, the Effects, and Produce of *The Spirit of God*,) wherever they are found, and in whomsoever they discover themselves, do jointly bear Witness with our Spirit, (our Heart, and Understanding,) that we are the Children of God; are adopted to Salvation, and determin'd to eternal Life.

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And, whereas we interpret *The Spirit* in this Text, by the Fruits and Effects of it, (which may, at first Hearing seem harsh and strain'd,) it must be remember'd, that in a great Variety of other Passages in the New Testament, the Name, and Person of *The Holy Ghost*, is put to signify those Gifts, Graces, and good Works, which flow from Him. Such are all those Parts of the New Testament, in which *The Holy Spirit* is said to be given in Measure, or without Measure; to be poured out on Men; to be quenched, and the like; All which Passages do evidently relate, Not to the Person of *The Holy Ghost*, (for That cannot be said to be extinguish'd, or to be poured out,) but only to His Fruits and Effects. After the same manner is *The Spirit* to be understood in this Text. They are the Fruits of the Spirit, (our good Actions,) that give Evidence to our being *the Children of God*, or ground a reasonable Hope of our future Salvation.

Thus have we seen What that Testimony of *The Spirit* is, by which we may be certified of our being the true *Children of God*; namely, that it is the Evidence of *The Spirit*, taken from our good Works, as a sure Mark and Proof, that we are pursuing the Way of Heaven.

But, it will be ask'd, Is this Evidence from our Works infallible, and to be depended on?

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Can the Just Man, from these his good Actions, and from the Assurance which they give him, of his being actuated by God's *Holy Spirit*, raise from thence a certain Security that he shall be saved? Is there no Room to doubt of it; and is it unquestionably certain, that this Evidence of *The Spirit*, will carry him to Life? It is for the sake of answering this Question, that I go on

In the *Second Place*, briefly to enquire into the Degrees of Certainty, which this Testimony gives us; How far we may safely rely on it; and What Measures of Assurance of Salvation we may securely raise from it.

It is necessary to give the clearest Solution of this Matter, because the relying too much on this Evidence of *The Spirit* to our being the Children of God, hath produc'd very ill Consequences on many Men's Practices, and hath slacken'd their Vigour in their Prosecution of good Works. For, such just and upright Persons, upon comparing their Works with, (the only Rule of our Works,) the Word of God, and finding that they have been agreeable to it; and being, by this Testimony convinc'd, that they are the Children of God, in a State of Salvation, and have the Evidence of *The Holy Spirit* to assure them of it; they have hence concluded, that, as the Evidence of *The Holy Spirit* is infallible, and, as What
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He attests must necessarily come to pass, so they themselves must be sure, and certain of Salvation; — That, having this Evidence of *The Spirit*, they cannot fail of it; and, that, as sure as *The Spirit* is true, so certain is their future Salvation.

This Presumption of a Certainty of being sav'd, in Conformity to the present Evidences of our being in a State of Salvation, hath been the Parent of Negligence and Sloth in the Exercise of their Duty; hath taken off from that Diligence and Steadiness which they formerly practis'd; and hath hindered Men from such a final Perseverance, as God expects and requires at our Hands.

Never were the Cautions, which St Paul hath given us, [*Let him that thinketh he standeth, take Heed lest he fall*; — and, *Be not high-minded, but fear,*] more proper and seasonable, than upon this Occasion, and to Men in these Circumstances. The Evidence which *The Spirit* gives to our being *God's Children*, and in a State of Salvation, is indeed sure and certain for the present Time, and our Condition at this Juncture; but, it cannot be thought to warrant us, that we shall for ever be so, or give us an Earnest and Assurance, that, for the remaining Part of our Lives, we shall infallibly continue in the same State. A righteous, faithful, and regenerate Person may confidently

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fidently assure himself, that whilst he continues to be such, he is in Favour with God, and an Heir of eternal Life; but this is no Assurance, that he may not fall off from this State, — may not lapse into Sin, — and may not, by forfeiting his Holiness, forfeit withal the Security of his Salvation.

We are all of us very sensible, that there is no absolute Security from Sinning. If then every Man be liable to Sin, no Man can assure himself that he shall not Sin; and consequently no Man can be infallibly certain that he shall attain Salvation.

St Paul indeed speaks very confidently, and with the utmost Assurance of his own eternal Salvation, and delivers himself in Terms, which put it beyond all Doubt. Thus, [*2 Tim. Ch. 4. v. 7, 8.*] he says, *I have fought a good Fight, I have finished my Course, I have kept the Faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a Crown of Righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge shall give me at that Day.* But, if we look back to the preceeding Verse, we shall find, that this was spoken but a very small Time before his Suffering Death; For he there tells us, *He was then ready to be offered, and the Time of his Departure was at hand;* And therefore, seeing his Course was so near run out, and the remaining Stage of his Journey was so short, he might be allow'd the Assurance of his Salvation.

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vation. But, this is not the Case of ordinary *Christians*; nor can it reasonably be drawn in to a Precedent and Example for us. We know not at what Distance our Period of Life is set: We know not how many Temptations we have still to encounter; and therefore, We know not, but we may yet fall, and be depriv'd of this Evidence, which at present we are possess'd of.

Nay, it is observable, that even the same *St Paul* himself, in the former Parts of his Life, and at the Distance of some Years before his Dissolution, expresses himself with much Uncertainty as to his future Salvation; and gives us to understand, that he thought it possible at least, that he might miss the great Prize of eternal Life. For, so he tells us, [*1 Cor. 4. 4.*] *Tho' I know Nothing of my self, (i.e. am not conscious of any just Cause, that should exclude me from Salvation,) yet I am not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is The Lord.* And, in another Part of his Writings, he tells us, that whilst he was preaching to, and saving others, it might possibly come to pass, that he himself might be a Cast-away.

In a Word, The Assurance which we have of eternal Life, from this Evidence of *The Spirit* at present, is not absolute, but conditional only; i.e. it is no otherwise certain, and infallible, than as we persevere in our good Works,

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and continue stedfast unto the End. All the infallible Certainty that we can have in this Matter, is, that our Fulfilling God's Will, puts us in a State of Acceptance with him; and, as this may be known to us by the Evidence of our Works, so, if we continue therein, and do not deviate from our Duty, we may have an unerring Assurance, that we shall finally be sav'd. But, on the other hand, the present Testimony of *The Spirit to our Salvation*, can be no sufficient Warrant, and Security for our future Behaviour; — is not to be depended on, as what will necessarily engage us to Perseverance; but, as long as it is possible for us to fall from Holiness, so long is it possible, that we may fall from all Degrees of Assurance, (nay even from all Degrees of Hope,) of eternal Bliss.

But, I hasten, in the Last Place, to draw from this Discourse some practical Inferences; and to improve this Subject, into some proper Directions for our Conduct and Behaviour.

First then, Since this Witness of *The Holy Spirit to our being the Children of God*, is founded solely upon the Agreement of our Works with the Laws of God, and upon our producing the Fruits of his *Holy Spirit*, Let this Consideration incite and provoke us to the Exercise of these Works, which must be follow'd by this comfortable Witness and Assurance of

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Salvation.

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Salvation. If the Reflecting on having done our Duty, can inspire us with a Certainty, that we are in a State of Salvation, Who is so blind as not to see the Obligations under which he lies to perform his Duty, and to make himself happy in the Assurance of a glorious Immortality? If the Practice of Virtue can produce a Certainty of a Reward, is not that Man insatuated, who will not be at the Pains of obtaining this unspeakable Satisfaction by the Practice of Virtue? If good Works be necessary to assure us of Heaven, is it not obvious, that it is our necessary Interest to prosecute good Works? And, if the whole Complex of Christian Virtues be a sure Means of making us the Children of God, is it not the Height of Folly to content ourselves with but a few, or perhaps none of them at all? Surely, the Neglect of such Exercises can result from no other Cause, than either a wilful Ignorance of the Blessedness of a future Life, or a supine Carelessness and Undervaluing of it's Enjoyments; either of which Causes is altogether unworthy of a Man, and a Shame to any Being that is rational.

But, Secondly, The serious reflecting on the great and manifold Privileges, to which we are entitled by our being the Children of God, ought to have it's just Weight with us, towards spurring us on to that only Method, by which

we become God's Children, the bringing forth the Fruits of *The Spirit*. We are inform'd, in the Verse which immediately follows the Text, that *if we are the Children of God, we are then Heirs; Heirs of God, and joint Heirs with Christ*. What more valuable Possessions can we desire to inherit, than those, which our Saviour is gone before to prepare for us? On what can our Hearts be more delightfully fix'd, than on those, where true Joys are to be found?

The Land of *Canaan*, — a Land of Olive-yards, and Vine-yards, — a Land flowing with Milk and Honey, is indeed represented in Scripture as a Type (but surely a very faint, distant and imperfect one,) of those heavenly Mansions, whose Inheritance is ours by a like irreversible Promise. The Descriptions of this Inheritance, which are communicated in holy Writ, are but so many Metaphors taken from such Things of this World, as do most forcibly strike our Imaginations, rather to raise our Ideas of their Magnificence and Grandeur, than to give a just Account of what they really are in themselves. And St Paul seems to have done most Justice to these Rewards, when he entitles them *such, as Eye hath not seen, nor Ear heard, nor hath enter'd into the Heart of Man to conceive*. If so valuable be the Inheritance, to which we acquire a Title by the Evidence of the *Holy Spirit* that we are the Children

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Children of God, we must prove the most unpardonable Traytors to ourselves, and our own Interests, if we omit any Means by which this Title may be purchas'd.

Lastly, Let us be careful to avoid the two fatal Extreame mention'd in the Introduction to this Discourse, and into which the Unwari-ness of Men hath often betray'd them, by their wrong Judgment of their own State and Con-dition, with relation to this Evidence of God *The Holy Ghost*. Let those, who are so happy as to be possess'd of this Testimony, give God the Glory of it, — impute it to it's proper Cause, the Divine Mercy, — improve it to their Furtherance in Piety, — and be excited to persevere, till their Assurance shall be lost in actual Fruition. On the other hand, Let those, who upon Examination, do not feel this Degree of Certainty, not be thereby tempted to Disquiet or Despair, not think the worst of themselves; but join their Endeavours after it with their Prayers to God for it; confiding in that Pro-mise, which *St Paul* hath convey'd to us, that *We shall all, in due Season, reap the Reward, pro-vided that we faint not.*



SERMON

SERMON XIII.

ROM. XIV. 13.

--- *That no Man put a Stumbling-block, or an Occasion to fall in his Brother's Way.*

THE Prohibition given us in these Words, is equivalent to that, which in so many other Passages of Scripture, is express'd by the several Terms of *giving Scandal*, and of causing *Offence to a weak Fellow Christian*, in such a manner, as, by the Influence of our Example, he may be led into Sin, contrary to his Conscience; or, at least, act with a doubting Conscience, which is also committing a great Sin.

The Subject of this Chapter will, in some measure, let us into the Scope of the Duty injoin'd us in the Text. The Converts to *Christianity* consisting partly of *Jews*, and partly of *Gentiles*; and each of these retaining still a good Liking to some of the Rites and Ob-

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fervances of those Religions they had so lately deserted; — hence it unavoidably came to pass, that the respective Actions of One Party, would give Offence, and Scandal to those of the Other Side. The One, would abstain from the Use of certain Sorts of Meats, as being, to their weak Consciences, unclean and profane; The Other, would indifferently and promiscuously eat of all Kinds, as being sensible of their *Christian Liberty*, and as knowing that *to the pure all Things are pure*. Some would more strictly and conscientiously observe a fix'd and periodical Day; whilst Others, thinking every Day alike, made no such Distinction. Some would refuse that Meat, which they knew had been offer'd in Sacrifice to an Idol, as conceiving that it was thereby profan'd, and that in the Use of such Meats they should tacitly communicate with Idols and Devils; but Others, being perswaded in their Consciences, that *an Idol is Nothing*, (i. e. as the *Jewish* Writers say, is no Creature of God, was not produc'd by the Maker of all other Beings, but is the sole Device and Creature of Men,) and that they did not in this Action, defile their Consciences, freely and without Scruple allow'd themselves to eat of such Kinds of Meats.

These Differences in their Practices, (tho' in themselves no ways culpable, because proceeding

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ceeding on either Side from the Dictates of their Consciences,) accidentally became highly blameable; the Practices of both becoming a Snare and a Trap, and administering an Occasion to fall, to several weak Brethren of the opposite Opinion. For, a *Christian*, whose Conscience was not entirely satisfied in relation to some of these Practices, (as the Eating, for Instance, of Meats that had been offer'd in Sacrifice to an Idol,) seeing another Person eat them without Scruple, of whose greater Knowledge, and unblemish'd Sanctity he had conceiv'd a great Opinion, — he would be induc'd to do the same merely by the Authority of the Other's Example; and thus be led into Sin himself, by the Snare accidentally laid in his Way.

To remedy this Evil, (which is term'd *the giving Scandal, and Offence, and the putting a Stumbling-block and an Occasion to fall in the Way of another,*) St Paul in the first Place fully asserts the Liberty of *Christians* in all indifferent Things whatsoever; and pronounces, that we may freely make Use of all Things, if our Consciences are so satisfied, and acquiesce in their Lawfulness, (so much being the plain Import of what he delivers at Verse 14, *I know and am perswaded by The Lord Jesus, that there is Nothing unclean in itself; but to him that esteemeth any Thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.*

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unclean. And again, Verse 20, *All Things indeed are pure;*) But withall the Apostle, in the next Place acquaints us, that altho' a Man's own Conscience be well satisfied of the Lawfulness of such Actions, and so he might safely venture on them as to himself, yet he ought, in Charity, to refrain and abridge himself of that Part of his *Christian Liberty*, if it give Offence to his Brother's weak Conscience, — if it become a Means of ensnaring him into Sin, — or give him Occasion to act *That* with a doubting Conscience, which *He* acts with a right and well-inform'd one.

This is the Direction of the Apostle in the Words of my Text, and some of the following Verses; *Let no Man put a Stumbling-block, or an Occasion to fall in another's Way. But, if thy Brother be grieved with thy Meat, thou walkest not charitably. Destroy not him with thy Meat, for whom Christ died. For Meat, destroy not the Work of God. All Things indeed are pure; but it is Evil for that Man who eateth with Offence. And Lastly, It is good neither to eat Flesh, nor to drink Wine, nor any Thing whereby thy Brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.*

From this Enquiry into the Scope of the Author, You may have some, not altogether imperfect, Notion, Wherein consists the Nature of the Sin hereby forbidden; namely, that we are prohibited those several Kinds

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of Actions, which are in themselves indifferent, and in the Use of which our own Consciences would freely permit us, but which would, yet, give Occasion of Offence to weaker Brethren, and be a Means of leading them into what must be a Sin in Them, as being what their Consciences are unsatisfied and doubtful in.

Our *Christian* Liberty is to be wav'd, and we are not to allow ourselves the Exercise of such Actions, as we ourselves judge to be lawful, if such our Practice lead other Men into Sin, and tempt them to do the same Thing, whilst they are not convinc'd, that it is lawful to them.

This is the Offence here forbidden by the Name of giving *Scandal*, or offending our weak Brother. But, since the Nature of this Sin of giving *Scandal* seems not to be rightly understood generally; Since some Men have represented it in very different Colours from those, in which the holy Scripture describes it; and since some Mistakes, founded on these Misrepresentations of it, in Matters of great Concernment, (even no less than that of *Church-Communion*;) have been receiv'd, maintain'd and grown popular; — I shall take Occasion from the Words now read, truly to State the Nature of the Sin here prohibited; to shew at large, What it is to give *Scandal* and Offence; and

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and thereby to rectify those common Mistakes, which have been receiv'd concerning it, in relation to Men's Communion with the establish'd Church.

The Word *Σκάνδαλον*, from whence the English Name of *Scandal*, or *Offence* is deriv'd, is us'd almost only in the Scriptures, and is seldom, or never, found in that Sense in any Writings but the sacred. In the *Greek* Translation of the Old Testament it signifies sometimes a Trap, or a Snare, which Men make use of to catch any Prey: Sometimes it signifies any Impediment, Obstacle or Hindrance, which is lay'd across a Road or Way, by Means of which the Traveller is detain'd and stopp'd from pursuing his Journey, till that Obstacle be remov'd; And among other such Obstacles, it more particularly denotes those sharp Stakes, either of Iron or Wood, which in Time of War, Men us'd to set up, either in Fields or Roads thro' which their Enemies were to pass, in order to wound or annoy them, and by galling their Feet, to retard their March; And, Lastly, Sometimes it denotes such a Stone or Block in the Way, over which Men would necessarily stumble and fall, if their Sight be not good, or if they walk in the dark.

These are the proper and natural Significations of the Term *Scandal*, as it occurs in the Old Testament: And being from thence borrow'd

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row'd and made Use of by the Writers of The New Testament; it there occurs in a figurative, metaphorical, and spiritual Acceptation: And it signifies, in this spiritual Sense, any Action or Behaviour in a *Christian*, which, tho' it be no Sin in him that doth it, (as proceeding from a firm Perswasion of it's Lawfulness,) yet may, by Misacceptation, be Occasion of Sin in another Person. *Scandal*, in this Sense, is the Doing such a Thing, as shall lead another Man into Sin, and the laying before him a Stumbling-block, by which he falls into an evil Action.

In farther treating this Subject, I shall observe the following Method;

First, I shall point out the several Ways and Methods, in which this Scandal or Offence is given, or taken.

Secondly, I shall endeavour to describe the great Mischief and Sinfulness of giving this Scandal, and of administering Occasion to a weak Brother of Sinning.

Lastly, I shall lay down some prudential Rules for our Behaviour, in order to prevent our giving Scandal; rectifying by the Way, some popular Mistakes which have been entertain'd concerning the Nature of Scandal, and which relate to our Communion with the Establish'd Church.

In the First Place then, I am to point out the

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the several Ways and Methods, in which this *Scandal* or *Offence* is given, or taken.

Scandal may be given either knowingly, intentionally and willingly, or undesignedly and by mere Accident. It is given intentionally and willingly, when by Precept, by Counsel, by Persuasion, by Gifts, by Authority, or by any direct Method of influencing another, we lead him into Sin, and occasion his Wickedness. Thus, when *Balaam* instructed King *Balak* to cast a *Stumbling-block* before the Children of *Israel*, by tempting them with their Daughters to commit Fornication, to degenerate into the same Idolatry with themselves, — and by this means to make God become their Enemy and favour the Cause of the *Moabites*, (as you will find *Numb. 31. 16.* compar'd with *Revelations 2. 14.*) he hereby in the highest Degree was guilty of *Scandal*, by laying this Snare in the Way of the *Israelites*, in which he had too great Success. Thus again, when *Jezebel* counsel'd *Ahab*, deeply concern'd at *Naboth's* refusing him his Vineyard, in these Words [*Dost thou now govern Israel?*] insinuating thereby, that as an absolute Prince he might possess himself of it by Violence, he thereby lay'd a *Scandal* before him, and occasion'd all that Tragedy which follow'd in that Affair.

Indeed, when we thus offend our Brother, by

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by willingly doing any Thing which will naturally and unavoidably lead him into Sin, this Species of *Scandal* is hardly to be distinguish'd from an actual tempting him to it; and, as such, is equally culpable and altogether as wicked, as it would be directly and expressly to entice and provoke him to it.

But, as I said, we may scandalize and offend a weak *Christian*, not only intentionally and willingly, but also undesignedly and by mere Accident. Thus, an unguarded Behaviour, a loose Expression, a great Freedom in the Use of Meats and Drinks, may accidentally become a Snare, and provoke another Person to a sinful Excess in these Liberties; especially if the Persons, who give this Occasion, are Men in any eminent Station, whose Office gives them Authority, whose Place renders them conspicuous, whose superiour Knowledge recommends them to the general good Liking, or whose Reputation for Holiness makes them Examples and Patterns for their Inferiours to copy after.

One vicious Action in these, or indeed an indifferent Action, if it be misrepresented and understood to be vicious, may diffuse a general Poison into the Practice of others; who will, thereby, freely and without Scruple indulge themselves in those Liberties, of which they presume they have a Precedent in One, who,

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who, they have Reason to think, should both Know, and Do better, were that Action sinful. Thus we find the Behaviour of *St Peter* at *Antioch*, (in withdrawing his Conversation from the *Gentile* Converts to *Christianity*, in order to comply with the unreasonable Prejudices of the *Jewish* Converts, who imagin'd, that it was sinful to hold Communion with any Persons not circumcis'd, tho' they had actually embrac'd and made Profession of the *Christian* Faith,) gave great Offence and Scandal to many of those *Gentile* Converts; — occasion'd their Revolt to *Heathenism*; made them forsake *Christianity*, return to their former idolatrous Worship; and by this mean, necessitated that rough Treatment, which *St Paul* gave that Apostle upon his Arrival at *Antioch*; — his reprimanding him, withstanding him boldly to the Face, and giving him Place not so much as for an Hour; but blaming him, as he tells us, because he was to be blamed. And of Scandal thus undesignedly given, it must be observ'd, that tho' it may be of equal Prejudice to the Person receiving it, as a design'd Scandal would have been, yet it is not always equally culpable in the Person, who inadvertently gives it.

Having thus shewn by what Methods Scandal is said to be given, I now proceed to shew When it is taken.

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And here it must be observ'd, that *Scandal* cannot properly be said to be taken, unless the Person taking it, be thereby led into some actual Sin. He only is truly scandaliz'd, in the Scripture Use of the Word, who, by the Offence given him, is influenc'd to do somewhat, which he ought Not to have done. A Man may be griev'd, or offended, in the common Notion of the Word [Offended] at what he sees another Man do; but this, if it goes no further, is only Grief, or Displeasure, and Not the Falling away, which only is *Scandal*. Displeasure, or Dislike of an Action, is Not, in the Scripture Sense, to be offended at it: And *Scandal* consists, Not in being griev'd at a suppos'd Crime in another, but solely, in our imitating and practising that suppos'd Crime.

That this is the only proper Sense of *Scandal*; — that it implies such an Offence, as leads another into actual Sin; — and that, without that fatal Consequence, such an Offence cannot properly be styl'd *Scandal*, is evident from the Use of the Term *Scandal*, in all the Places of the New Testament in which it occurs; in all which Places it supposes, that it leads the Person scandaliz'd into the Commission of some Wickedness.

So *Matth. 5. v. 29, 30.* Our Saviour says, *If thy right Eye, or thy right Hand* [*σκανδαλίζῃ σε*] *offend thee, i.e. lead thee to Perdition, cut it off.*

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So again, *Matt. II. v. 6.* He says, *Blessed is he, who is not offended in me*, i. e. who is not diverted from believing in me, by the Meanness of my Appearance, and the Lowness of my Circumstances. So again, in this very Chapter, especially *v. 15* and *16*, and onwards, *Scandal* is describ'd to be such an Offence, as by which our Brother is destroy'd. From all which it is apparent, that *Scandal* cannot with any Propriety be said to be taken, unless it actually prevail on the Person taking it, to commit a Sin in virtue of that *Scandal*.

And this Observation concerning the Taking of *Scandal*, is the more worthy of our Notice and Attention, because it effectually solves and corrects one of those common and popular Mistakes, which I before mention'd, relating to Men's communicating with the establish'd Church in this Kingdom. Our Brethren of the Separation, taking Exception to the Use of some indifferent Things, and the Exercise of a few Ceremonies, (the Cross in Baptism, the Kneeling at the holy Sacrament, the Ring in Marriage, the Use of the Surplice, and some others of the like Kind,) are wont to tell us, that the Use of these Things gives them *Scandal*; that they cannot comply with these, because they give them Offence; and upon this Occasion, they use to object to us all those Texts of Scripture, in which we are forbidden

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to scandalize our Brethren, and to give them Offence. But, if they would rightly consider the Nature of *Scandal*, as it is describ'd in Scripture, they will easily find that this their Accusation is entirely groundless, and cannot pertinently be objected. For, it having already been shewn, that *Scandal* is then only taken, when it leads the Person taking it into the Practice of some Sin, This entirely subverts their Charge of *Scandal* on us. They are not induc'd to use these Ceremonies, because we make Use of them; and therefore, are not properly scandaliz'd, because not betray'd into Sin. Did our Use of these Ceremonies effectually prevail on them to use them, altho', at the same Time, they thought them unlawful, then indeed we should properly scandalize them; because our Example would lead them into Sin. But, as Things now stand, and as there is no Danger of our Brethren's Complying with these Ceremonies, solely upon Account of our Complying with them, so, there can be no Room for a Charge of *Scandal* on our Side; which, as hath been prov'd, is then only properly taken, when it prevails on a weak Brother to commit, what, to his Judgment, is sinful. The Offence therefore which these our Brethren take, at our Use of the aforesaid Ceremonies, may indeed be properly styl'd Causeless Anger, and Unreasonable Displeasure, but

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cannot be intituled true and proper *Scandal*; because they are not induc'd, thro' our Example, to comply with these Ceremonies which they judge unlawful.

But farther; *Scandal*, it is possible, may in many Cases be taken and receiv'd, and yet be in no ways sinful in the Person from whom it proceeded, and who accidentally became the Occasion of it's being receiv'd. Thus, the Teaching and Doctrines of our Saviour himself, are said in the New Testament to have offended and scandaliz'd the *Pharisees*: Yet, I presume, no one will from hence charge our Saviour with being guilty of *Scandal*. The *Cross of Christ* is also by St Paul averr'd to be a *Stumbling-block to the Jews, and Foolishness to the Greeks*: By which Passage must be understood, that the Indignity and Shame arising from his Suffering as a Malefactor on the Cross, was an Obstacle to both *Jews* and *Gentiles*. In both these Cases, here was properly a *Scandal* taken, since both sinned in not believing *Christ*; But the Guilt of that *Scandal* cannot reasonably be charg'd on our Blessed Lord; but solely on the unhappy and ill-founded Prejudices, which Men, so scandaliz'd, had given themselves up to.

2. I go on now to my second general Head; which was, to describe the great Sinfulness and Mischief of giving this *Scandal*, and of administering

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misfring an Occasion of Sin to a weak Brother.

How grievous a Sin that of giving *Scandal* is, (especially if it be done intentionally and willingly,) we may judge, from the Denunciation which our Saviour hath made against it, in the *Eighteenth* Chapter of *St Matth.* v. 6, 7. *Wo unto the World, saith he, because of Offences: For it must needs be that Offences come; but Wo unto that Man by whom the Offence cometh. And whoso shall offend one of these little Ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a Mill-stone were hanged about his Neck, and that he were drowned in the Depth of the Sea.* The Reason of this severe Denunciation is plain; because, the Giving such intended *Scandal*, involves the Giver in a double and complicated Guilt; and he is to be deem'd the Author, not only of his own Sin, but of that also which the Other committed thro' his Occasion.

The designedly putting a Stumbling-block in the Way of a weak Brother, is one of the principal Methods by which we become Partakers of other Men's Sins, against which *St Paul* to *Timothy* hath so strictly caution'd us. It is, indeed, the very same Employment with that of the Devil and all wicked Spirits. It is imitating their Example, in their restless Endeavours to ensnare Men into Sin, and labouring to catch and destroy the Souls of our Brethren.

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This is evidently the Crime and Guilt of all design'd and malicious *Scandals*; which will be the same, with respect to him who intentionally lays the Snare, whether it succeeds and takes Effect on the Subject of it, or no: The Wickedness of the Design is still the same, let the Event of it be what it will; and we are undoubtedly punishable for a guilty Intention, even tho' it doth not operate according to our Wish.

The Malice of the Devil, when tempting our Saviour after his *Forty Days Fast*, was never the less, or at all more excusable, in that it did not in Fact prevail, but was repuls'd by the Holy *Jesús*. And it is observable, that after *St. Peter* had asserted his Detestation of those Sufferings which his Master had shew'd him he was to undergo; After he had said [*Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be unto thee;*] and, by these Expressions, had endeavour'd to produce in him a Dread of Suffering, and so, in Effect, tempted him to Sin; Our Saviour, tho' the Temptation did not effectually ensnare him, and so did not actually scandalize him by making him sin, yet severely rebukes him, as guilty of Sin; *Get thee behind me, Satan,* saith he [*Matt. 16 v. 23 &c.*] *Thou art an Offence unto me; for thou savourest not the Things that be of God, but those that be of Men.*

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Such is the Guilt of intentional and design'd *Scandal*. As to that which is undesign'd, and happens accidentally, it seems more excusable, as not proceeding from the Will of the Giver. There may, however, be some Degrees of Guilt in it, as far as it may have been occasion'd by our Want of due Care in our Behaviour, of a fit Caution in our Practices, and of a prudent Circumspection in our Words and Actions. This naturally brings me to the

Last Head of this Discourse; and that was, To lay down some proper Rules for our Behaviour, suitable to the Circumstances we are in, in order to prevent the Sin of giving *Scandal*.

To this Purpose, the general Rule is, To do Nothing that hath but the Appearance or Face of Evil. Whether that Text of St Paul, which in our *English* Bible runs in these Words, [*Abstain from all Appearance of Evil*,] be rightly render'd, and truly imports what in this Version, it seems to do, I shall not here determine. And indeed I think [*ἐκ παντός*] would more rightly have been render'd, by [every Kind, every Sort, or every Species of Evil:] Yet, whatever be the true Import of that Text, it is still the Duty of every *Christian*, not only to abstain from actual Sin, but also from every Action that bears any the least Resemblance, or Similitude to Sin, or which

others

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others apprehend or judge to be unlawful. This is the most general Rule that can be given for our Conduct. And, if we abstain from every Thing, which is either really sinful, or by a weak Brother may possibly be construed to be sinful, we may then be confident, that we cannot give Offence.

And this Rule is agreeable to the Direction, which St Paul hath given, with relation to that Offence, which gave Occasion to all his Writings on this Subject; the Eating of Meats that had been offer'd to Idols. He determines, that *to the pure all Things are pure*; and, that a *Christian* might safely eat of all such Meats, provided he were first satisfy'd in his own Conscience of the lawfulness of it. But, with respect to the weak and unsatisfy'd Brother, and who might be ensnar'd by this Liberty which others took, He advises his *Christian* to abstain from that Freedom; — to wave his Privilege and Right; and to recede from his Liberty, in Charity to the other's Soul. *If Meat, (saith he, 1 Cor. 8. 13.) make my Brother to offend, I will eat no Flesh while the World standeth, lest I make my Brother to offend.*

Next to this Rule, of abstaining from any Practice which may give Offence and Scandal, it is our Duty not to insist rigorously on *Christian* Liberty; but to be as complying, as we safely may, with the Infirmities and Weaknesses

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nesses of our Brethren. When such their Doubts and Scruples arise from an erroneous and not well-inform'd Conscience, we ought, in Charity, to lend our Hand to their better Information; — to pity their Weakness, as proceeding only from Ignorance; — not to censure, revile, or persecute them; — not to throw Dirt and Reproach on them; — not to call them *Racha*, and break out into contumelious Expressions; but meekly to instruct them; to give them the best Light we can, whereby they may discern their Mistakes: Let us subdue their Errors, but not their Persons. These were the Methods, which our Saviour and his Apostles made Use of toward weak Brethren: And common Charity, and that universal Love, which we are to bear toward the Souls of all Men, require the same tender Usage from our Hands.

To these Directions for tender Usage of a weak Brother, and for waving our *Christian* Liberty in Compliance with a weak Conscience, there is indeed One Case, in which an Exception is to be made, and in which, such a Compliance is altogether unlawful: And that is, when this indifferent Action, (which might otherwise have been forborn, in Charity to a weak Conscience,) is injoin'd and commanded us by a lawful Authority. If we are commanded by our proper Governours to pra-

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etise any one Thing, which is, in it's Nature indifferent, and in which one might otherwise safely dispense with ourselves, this Injunction of our Superiours must determine our Practise; and we are oblig'd to comply with it, even tho' it may occasion a *Scandal* to a weak Brother.

The Reason is plain: Submission to the lawful Commands of our Governours is an express and positive Duty: Our Liberty of acting otherwise, is thereby superseded: Such Injunctions demand our Obedience; And to refuse our Submission, or to act contrary to their Orders, would surely give a fairer Handle to Offence, and a more plausible Occasion to *Scandal*, than can possibly be given by our Complying with such Orders. If the legislative Authority thinks fit to prescribe to our Practise, in an Action otherwise indifferent, we are bound, by that Obedience which is due to our Governours, to practise accordingly, tho' perhaps our so acting may scandalize our Brother.

This I take to be a Rule which will not bear Dispute. And this, by the Way, affords a sufficient Answer to another popular Mistake relating to Communion with the establish'd Church; and which is often objected to us by our Brethren of the Separation. They tell us, that since these Ceremonies, about which we differ,

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differ, are confessedly Things in their own Nature indifferent, but yet such, as are very offensive to their Judgments and Thoughts, we ought in Compassion to them, to wave the Use of them, to baptize without the Sign of the Cross; to administer the Sacrament without Kneeling; to leave off the Surplice; and thus, by Disuse, to drop the Matters of Offence.

But, in Answer to this, our Brethren ought to reflect, that tho' these Things be, in their own Nature, indifferent, yet they become otherwise now, when impos'd by Authority: We cannot now disuse those Ceremonies, because, That would be an Act of Disobedience towards both our temporal, and spiritual Governours. The Use of them is injoin'd by such, as have an undoubted Right to our Obedience; And by This, our Consciences are determin'd to a constant Use of them. Disobedience we are certain is a Sin: And to disuse such Ceremonies in Contempt of their Injunctions, would be only to humour Men in That, which, to our Judgments, appears to be unreasonable and groundless.

But, that we may enter farther into this Matter, it must be own'd, that tho' the former Rule of abstaining from even the Appearance of Evil, be, in the general, obligatory; yet it should be observ'd, in certain particular Circumstances,

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cumstances, with some Limitations and Restrictions. If every Action which should displease a weak Brother, were to be forboren thro' Fear of scandalizing him, This would lay an intolerable Burthen upon Men's Consciences; would perplex every Man with endless Doubts; and we should not be at Liberty to venture on any Action whatsoever with a satisfy'd Mind; since we cannot be assur'd, but that some one or other would misinterpret it to an Offence. Such a Practice also would further be attended with this Inconvenience, that we must, hereby, submit our Consciences and Judgments to Persons of the greatest Ignorance and Weakness; and must form every particular Action according to their Way of Thinking, and agreeably to their narrow Conceptions. This is, in Effect, to destroy all *Christian* Liberty whatsoever; It is to make the weaker Capacities the Judges over the Stronger; and to take off that Priviledge, which questionless belongs to the wisest and best-instructed *Christians*, of best knowing their Duty, and of acting accordingly.

For all these Reasons, and for others that might be produc'd, it is sufficient to acquit us from the Guilt of *Scandal*, if some Caution be given, and some Declaration made of the Integrity of that Action, and of it's being void of Design to ensnare Men into Sin. If, in such Cases, we endeavour to anticipate Mistakes,

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to rectify Men's Judgments, and to give warning that no Evil or Danger is intended to their Consciences, such Notice and Premonition will wipe off the *Scandal*.

There is but one Circumstance more in this Duty, which I think, carries any Difficulty; and that is, What is a Man to do in that unhappy Situation, when his Acting will give Offence to One Sort of Men, and his Not acting, to Another? In these nice Circumstances, when *Scandal* will necessarily be taken by one Side or other, Charity must be join'd, and directed by Prudence. Numbers, Capacities, and Fitness for Instruction are here to be regarded; that the fewer, and less judicious may be influenc'd to alter their Perswasions. If, (which can seldom happen,) the Case shall be still the same, we are then oblig'd to act according to our own Judgment and Conscience; and to practise what we are perswaded in the Sincerity of our Heart. To act otherwise, would involve us in manifest Dissimulation; and would be Endeavouring (what is the greatest Absurdity,) to make Amends for One *Scandal* by giving Another.

To conclude this Discourse: Altho' (as hath been shewn) our *Christian* Liberty may, in some Cases, be indulg'd; and tho' we are not, on all Occasions, oblig'd to abstain from indifferent Actions, by the Fear and Danger of giving
Scandal

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Scandal thereby; yet, as these Limitations are few; as they may escape vulgar Notice; as they require somewhat of more than common Discretion and Judgment; — so, for the Generality of Men, we cannot but recommend it as the more safe and commendable Practice, to avoid every Thing which may be converted into an Occasion of *Scandal*; to use the strictest Caution in every Word and Work; and to put no *Stumbling-block*, or *Occasion to fall in our Brother's Way*.



SERMON

SERMON XIV.

COLOSS. II. 23.

*Which Things have indeed a Shew of
Wisdom in Will-Worship.*

SAINT Paul, the Author of this Epistle, makes it his Business to caution the *Colossians*, against being led away into the Belief of certain popular Tenets, which were at that Time form'd, and industriously propagated by some *Judaizing Christians*, and probably by the whole Sect of the *Gnosticks*.

What these Tenets were, we may learn from the 8th and following Verses of this Chapter. *Beware, saith he, lest any Man spoil you thro' Philosophy, and vain Deceit, after the Tradition of Men, after the Rudiments of the World, and not after Christ. Let no Man judge you in Meat, or Drink, or in respect of an holy Day, or of the New Moon, or of the Sabbath: which are a Shadow of Things to come; but the Body is of Christ. Let no Man beguile You of your Reward, in a voluntary Humility, and worshipping of Angels, intruding into those Things, which he hath not*
seen,

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seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly Mind. Wherefore, if ye be dead from the Rudiments of the World, Why, as tho' living in the World, are ye subject to Ordinances; [Touch not, Taste not, Handle not,] which all are to perish with the Using, after the Commandments and Doctrines of Men.

The Truth is, The Persons, whose Opinions *St Paul* here opposes, had made strange Alterations in the *Christian* Religion; and instead of that plain, naked, and simple System, which our Saviour and his Apostles had inculcated, had made it a new Composition, by adopting into it many of the Principles both of *Heathenism* and *Judaism*; and then endeavour'd to obtrude it on the World, as the Sum and Complex of *Christian* Doctrines.

Thus, fond of the *Jewish* Observations, they adher'd, (v. 16.) to the *Distinction of Meats and Drinks; the Holy Days, New-Moons, and Sabbaths*, and the like Observances of the *Mosaick* Institution. And, out of the same Fondness for some of the *Heathen* Ordinances, they recommended the *Worshipping of Angels*, purely on the old *Heathen* Notion, that God, an all-perfect Being, cannot be approach'd and address'd to by Men; but that there is Need of a Mediator between them, to present our Addresses; that the Angels are such Mediators; and that we are to pray to God in, and by

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by them ; (Which mistaken Notion, hath justly been esteem'd the prime Source and Origin, of all the Idolatry that hath ever been practis'd :) and hereby they retain'd the Idolatry of the *Gentiles*. And further, under Colour of greater Austerities and Self-denyals, and the more free Application to the strict Duties of Morality, they added hereto the Prohibitions observ'd by some *Gentile* Sects, as the abstaining from Marriage and the like.

All these Ordinances *St Paul* condemns ; partly, because some of them were never instituted by God, (who alone hath the Right to prohibit the Use of his Creatures :) and partly, because such of them, as were founded in a *Divine* Institution, were abrogated and done away by the Coming of *Christ*, of whom they were only Types and Shadows.

These were the Apostle's Sentiments concerning these Matters as impos'd on *Christians*, and necessary to be practis'd. He allows in the Words of my Text, that the before-mention'd Austerities *have indeed a Shew of Wisdom in Will-Worship* ; i. e. are set off, and varnish'd by some specious Pretences ; as, that they are voluntary Services, and free-will Offerings to God ; that there is an Appearance of great, and more than ordinary Humility in them ; that they serve to punish and keep under the Body ; and consequently, as Parts of Will-
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Worship, or free and voluntary Acts of Piety, are not in themselves, and in that respect blameable; but become highly so, when impos'd upon *Christians*, as necessary Acts, or, as what God indispensably requires at our Hands.

What hath been said, is design'd, partly to open and explain the Text, and partly to give You some Insight into (what I intend for the Subject of this Discourse,) the Nature of *Will-Worship*; by which should be understood, such voluntary Acts of Piety, as good and holy Men prescribe to themselves, and perform as acceptable to God, tho' they be not absolutely impos'd or requir'd by him.

The Term *Will-Worship* occurring in this Passage only of Scripture, and being here found in Company with, and join'd to the other Tenets of those *Judaizing Christians* whom St Paul here condemns, This hath given Occasion to the Generality of Men, to understand the Name in an ill Sense; to think, that St Paul condemns all *Will-worship*, i. e. all Circumstances of Worship which God hath not immediately appointed, and which are only of human Institution, as equally unlawful with the other Practices he here censures; and that, of Consequence, we are forbidden to use any Rites or Ceremonies in Worship, other than what are prescrib'd in the sacred Scriptures.

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From this mistaken Notion, (as I hope I shall hereafter shew it to be,) it hath come to pass, that the several Circumstances of Worship, in which different Communion of *Christians* disagree and differ from each other, have been, by each Side, branded with the odious Name of *Will-Worship*; They have traduc'd each other, as guilty of a Sin, suppos'd to be forbidden in this Text; and calumniate each others Ways of Worship, by alledging this Passage of Scripture, which perhaps gives no Foundation, either to the Charges they make from it in particular, or to the Unlawfulness of all *Will-Worship* in the general.

It hath been much debated amongst Commentators on this Text, Whether the Term *Will-Worship*, as it here lies in this Verse, is to be understood in a good, or an ill Sense and Acceptation; i. e. Whether *Will-Worship* of any Kind be condemn'd by the Apostle, or Whether it be allow'd by him.

It seems most probable, that the Term is here to be taken in a good Sense: For, at the same Time that the Apostle condemns the before-mention'd Tenets, as impos'd and made necessary by the *Judaizing Christians*, he mentions, in the Text, *Will-Worship*, *Humility*, and *a Neglecting of the Body*, as specious Pretences, and fair Shews on their Behalf; and which, tho' not sufficient, may yet be some Excuse for

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them. And therefore, *Will-Worship* being join'd with *Humility* and a *Neglecting*, or not sparing, *the Body*, (which are confessedly good Acts,) it may seem that *Will-Worship* may be so reckon'd likewise.

But, I shall not enter farther into this Debate; nor determine Whether it here stands in a good, or a bad Sense. It is sufficient to our Purpose to observe, that *Will-Worship*, consider'd abstractedly and apart from the Context, is capable of both a good and a bad Sense, according to the Circumstances in which it is practised; that there are Rules to discern, What voluntary Acts of Piety, or Circumstances of religious Worship are laudable and allow'd to *Christians*, and What are forbidden, or not allow'd them; and which, of Course, must fall under the Notion of a sinful *Will-Worship*.

In order to form a right Judgment concerning *Will-Worship*, and to prevent, or correct such Mistakes as have been entertain'd relating to it, I shall, in this Discourse, observe the following Method:

First, I shall from the Text, and the preceding Verses, shew the Nature of *Will-Worship*; What, in this Chapter, is condemn'd as *Will-Worship*, and What is not so condemn'd; From whence it will appear, What Practices we are to avoid, as being culpable and superstitious *Will-Worship*, and What we may allow ourselves

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ourselves in, as a *Will-Worship* indeed, but yet acceptable and pleasing to God.

In the Second Place, when it shall thus have been determin'd by Scripture, What is laudable, and What is culpable *Will-Worship*, I shall make some Applications of it to those Bodies of *Christians*, who are us'd to inveigh against the Ways of Worship in their Brethren, as culpable *Will-Worship*.

Lastly, I shall close the whole with a few Inferences of a practical Nature; and shew what Duties arise from this Subject.

First then, I shall undertake, from the Text and the preceding Verses, to shew the Nature of *Will-Worship*; to Enquire What, in this Chapter, is condemn'd as *Will-Worship*, and What is Not so condemn'd: From whence it will appear, What Practices we are to avoid, as being culpable and superstitious *Will-Worship*, and What we may allow ourselves in, as a *Will-Worship* indeed, but yet acceptable and pleasing to God.

To satisfy this Enquiry, I shall examine 1st Negatively, what cannot be judg'd a culpable and superstitious *Will-Worship*; and 2^{dly} Affirmatively, what is, and ought to be deem'd such.

First then, the Circumstances of religious Worship, (such as Time, Place, Posture and the like,) cannot reasonably be deem'd a culpable

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Will-Worship. These are no more than the necessary Appendages, and the inseparable Attendants of Worship itself. The Duties of Religion cannot be perform'd without an Allowance of Human Liberty in these; And for this Reason doubtless, hath God thought fit to leave these outward Circumstances to human Prescription.

The Commands of God with regard to these, are only general. We are requir'd, for Instance, to worship God with our Bodies: Whether therefore, this Bodily Worship be perform'd by Inclining the Head, or Bowing the Knee, or by Prostrating the Body, is no ways culpable, if the Humility of the Heart be thereby testify'd.

Worship again, is inseparable from Place; And therefore it cannot justly be reckon'd *Will-Worship*, if Stated Places for publick Worship be appointed and set apart.

The Face of the Suppliant must necessarily be turn'd to some Part of the World; and therefore, it cannot be deem'd culpable to worship toward the East. These, and the like Circumstances, are not to be look'd on as essential Parts of Worship; but are left to be determin'd by the Will of Men; And therefore, Whoever shall condemn these necessary Adjuncts of Divine Worship, as superstitious and culpable *Will-Worship*, can only have Recourse

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course to the Holy Scripture, in order to find, Whether every such Circumstance be there injoin'd and expressly set down by God himself: But, the very least Acquaintance with that sacred Book, will demonstrate, that such a Search will be vain and ineffectual.

Secondly, as culpable *Will-Worship* doth not extend to the necessary Circumstances of religious Worship, — so neither doth it reach so far, as to prohibit the Civil Magistrate from making positive Laws, with respect to Things indifferent in the Service of God: In Things, which are confessedly indifferent, and left undetermin'd by Scripture, every Man is at Liberty to prescribe to himself: And surely, it can be no Stretch of Power, nor any Ways unlawful for the supreme Authority of a Nation, to prescribe to a Subject in Things, where, without such an Interposition, he might lawfully have prescrib'd to himself. Where a Subject hath a Power of binding and obliging himself, the Legislature hath questionless a Power of binding: And therefore, the Obedience which is paid to the Injunctions of the Magistracy, relating to Things, otherwise indifferent, in the Worship of God, cannot be deem'd a culpable or superstitious *Will-Worship*: It is most evidently a Matter of Obedience; in the Payment of which, our Liberty of acting is previously taken away by the Letter of such Laws,

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Nor, Thirdly, doth the Charge of culpable *Will-Worship* extend to such voluntary Acts of Piety, as good and holy Men are willing to lay on themselves, in greater Degrees and Proportions, than, in strictness of Duty, may be requir'd of them. For, as no Man is requir'd to do more than is commanded him, so no Man is to be censur'd for performing much, where less may in Strictness be exacted.

St *Paul* hath plainly determin'd, that such voluntary Acts of Piety cannot be culpable *Will-Worship*, but are rather commendable, in the Case, which he hath Stated, of Marriage, and Celibacy. He tells us, that *the married Person doth well, but the single better*. If therefore any Person, for the greater Purity, and for the closer Pursuance of God's Service, abstains from Marriage, he hath the Warrant of the Apostle, that such a voluntary Service is in no ways a blameable *Will-Worship*, but an acceptable Service to God.

It is farther observeable, that whilst our Saviour severely taxes and inveighs against the Sect of the *Pharisees*, he doth not condemn them for their severe Fastings and Abstinence; for their Mortifications and Self-Denyals; or for their exact Compliance with the Law of *Moses*, even in the smallest Matters: *These*, he tells them, *ought they to have done*: But, what he blames in them, was, their Pride and Haughti-

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Haughtiness; — their Valuing themselves upon these spiritual Performances; their Treating all other Persons with Contempt and Aversion; and their Endeavouring to impose these their voluntary Services on the Necks of other *Jews*, under the Pretence of their being necessary, and requir'd by God.

Of the same laudable Kind were the free-will Offerings among the *Jews*. They were not commanded from them. They were at Liberty to offer them, or not. They were only told, that if they made such, they should be of Beasts without Blemish or Maim; and then God would accept them.

The same is the Measure in *Christian* Virtues; Charity to the Poor, for Instance, is a general Duty: The Quantity of our Alms is no where prescrib'd: He therefore, who gives what he can afford, performs indeed his Duty; But he that gives in a greater Abundance, undoubtedly makes himself more acceptable to God, without the Imputation of blameable *Will-Worship*. These voluntary Acts of Piety are indeed the Worship of the Will; but it is of the Will guided by right Reason, and influenc'd by right Religion, and therefore is no ways blameable.

It is the Observation of a celebrated Father in the ancient Church, [*Gregory Nazianzen*,] “that, as there are Things in the *Christian* Law
“which are commanded, which therefore lay
“a Ne-

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“a Necessity on *Christians*, and the not ob-
 “serving of which incurs a Danger; so there
 “are others, which are not of Necessity, but
 “of Choice: And these bring Honour and
 “Reward to those who observe them, but no
 “Danger to those who observe them not.”
 From all which it is evident, that in the Sense
 of the Law, the Gospel, and right Reason,
 such free and voluntary Acts of Piety, as good
 Men sometimes perform, cannot justly be com-
 prehended under blameable *Will-Worship*.

Fourthly and Lastly, The *Will-Worship* which
 is culpable, cannot be judg'd to extend to such
 decent, tho' uncommanded Rules and Orders,
 as are observ'd Either in the Worship of God,
 or in any other Act of Duty towards Him.
 The Service of God is to be a reasonable Ser-
 vice. We are to reflect, that his infinite Per-
 fections set him at an immense Distance from
 us; that in his Presence, even the holy Angels
 veil their Faces; that Nothing is pure and
 clean in his Sight; and therefore, that our Ad-
 dresses to him are to be perform'd with the
 utmost Reverence and Humility, and with the
 greatest Marks of Submission and Lowliness.
 To thrust ourselves into his Presence, to ap-
 proach him without some previous Acts of Ce-
 remony, is to affront and insult him. What-
 ever voluntary Rules, therefore, we lay down
 and comply with, for the sake of Decency and

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Propriety in the Service of God, cannot come within the Notion of unlawfull *Will-Worship*, but are to be esteem'd as proper Ways of Addressing ourselves to Heaven.

Having thus, in Order to correct some popular Mistakes relating to this Subject, briefly pointed out, What voluntary Services do not properly fall within the Compass of culpable *Will-Worship*, I am now to proceed, by the Directions of our Text and Context, to declare affirmatively, What is to be condemn'd as *Will-Worship* truly blameable, and the Exercise of which should be avoided by us.

In the First Place then, culpable *Will-Worship* consists, Not in the necessary Circumstances of our Worshipping God, (as hath been before evinc'd,) but, in adding to the Object of our Worship; in adoring and solemnly invoking any other Being besides *That*, to which all our Prayers are to be directed, the One Supreme God; in joining to Him, in our Acts of Worship, any created or dependent Being; briefly, in Paying Divine Honours to any Creature, either singly and by itself, or jointly with God, or as an Intercessor and Mediator between God and Man.

That such a Practice as this, is strictly, and properly *Will-Worship*, in the evil and forbidden Sense, is evident from the Context in Verse the 18th. *Let no Man, saith the Apostle,*
beguile

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bezuile you of your Reward in a voluntary Humility, and Worshipping of Angels. Here we see One great Branch of *Will-Worship* condemn'd by *St Paul*; namely, That idolatrous Practice, usual among the *Gnosticks*, of worshipping of Angels; a Practice arising from that general Mistake, which I mention'd in the Beginning of this Discourse, That Man is too mean a Creature to address himself to God without some Mediator; That the Angels are such Mediators; and That we are to worship Them, and God by them. According, therefore, to this Chapter of *St Paul*, One eminent Part of the *Will-Worship* which is unlawful, is, the Adding to the Object of Divine Worship, or, the Adoring any other Being than God only.

In the Second Place, culpable *Will-Worship* consists, Not (as I have before evinc'd,) in our Obedience to, and Compliance with such Laws and Institutions, as our Governours shall think fit to make, with respect to Things indifferent, and which God hath not prescrib'd; but, it consists in urging Obedience to any Precepts and Rules, under Pretence of their being impos'd and commanded by God, which at the same Time, Either never were the Commands of God at all; — or else, if they had at any Time been so, were abrogated and done away by the Appearance and Coming of *Christ*. The insisting on some Observances as
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the Injunctions of God, which in Fact never were such, or else have been abolish'd, is apparently from the Context, One Species of that *Will-Worship*, which St Paul condemns.

The Ordinances mention'd in v. 21, and which the *Gnosticks* pretended as necessary, [*Touch not; Taste not, Handle not,*] (in which are imply'd, as the best Commentators suppose, the forbidding to marry, and the abstaining from many Sorts of Meat, beside those which God hath forbidden,) These, I say, never had been the Ordinances of God at all; And therefore, it was an impious *Will-Worship* to require them from Men.

On the other Hand, the Ordinances mention'd in v. 16th, [*the Holy Days, New Moons, and Sabbaths,*] had been indeed the Commands of God in former Ages, but were abolish'd and done away in *Christ*; or, as the Apostle expresses it in the very next Verse, *were a Shadow of Things to come, but the Body was Christ*. And therefore, to insist on these, as still necessary, was a flagrant Instance of this culpable *Will-Worship*.

Thirdly, What St Paul here condemns, consists, Not in such voluntary and free Acts of Piety, as good and holy Men are willing to exercise, in greater Degrees and Proportions than is strictly requir'd, (for such, as I have before evinc'd, are in no ways blameable, but rather

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rather acceptable to God;) but, it consists, (as will appear from the Context) in the Dogmatizing, the Imposing on others, and requiring from our Brethren, those great Degrees and Proportions of voluntary Acts of Piety, as necessary to their eternal Salvation, when God hath not made them so, nor indispensably oblig'd us to them.

To exert greater Acts of Piety in ourselves, than we are strictly tyed down to, cannot be esteem'd culpable *Will-Worship*, for the Reasons before assign'd: But, it is the Exacting them from others, and Laying them on their Necks, which makes us guilty of this Evil. Thus, the Ordinances mention'd in Verse 21st [*Touch not; Taste not; Handle not,*] implying Abstinence from sensual Pleasures, and severe Mortifications of the Body, are not oppos'd by St Paul, as simply evil, or unfit to be practis'd by any private *Christian*; but, they then become a *Will-Worship* in the ill Sense, when they are dogmatically exacted from our Brethren; when, as the Apostle expresses it, v. 16th, *we judge one another in Meats or Drinks*; when we impose them as necessary to be observ'd by all Men; and when we censure, condemn, and think evil of our Brethren, because they do not practise the same Austerities with ourselves.

And this, in Truth, was the great Fault, and prime Error in the Sect of the *Pharisees*.

They

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They practis'd at first greater Austerities than other Sects of the *Jews*: Their voluntary and free-will Services were very considerable: And, whilst they went no farther than this, no Blame could be lay'd on them. But when, in Process of Time, they not only permitted these their voluntary Services to be in too great Esteem among them, and even to supplant the *greater Duties of the Law, Justice and Judgment*, but also, to be form'd into absolute Precepts, and to be preach'd up as necessary Duties; when they taught, that the Use of certain Meats was detestable; and upon these Accounts, not only censur'd and condemn'd all those, who did not believe and practice as themselves, but also separated themselves from them, as Persons impure; thenceforward, their voluntary Services became a culpable *Will-Worship*; and their Censoriousness and Dogmatizing, render'd evil and blame-worthy, what before was innocent, and perhaps laudable.

In the Fourth and Last Place, culpable *Will-Worship* consists, Not in the Observance of any such decent, tho' uncommanded Rules and Orders, as are observ'd by us in the Worship of God, or any other Duty towards him; but in the Observance of such Usages, as are merely superstitious; of such Ceremonies, as are ridiculous; of such, as are not significant; of such, as in no Ways tend, either to our In-

struction

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struction in Religion, or Edification in Holiness.

The Service of God is to be a reasonable Service; And Nothing of human Prescription should be admitted therein, but what intimates some Mercy from God, or points out some Article of Faith; or hath some Sort of Influence on our Manners. All others should be discarded, as superstitious *Will-Worship*.

And, that this is agreeable to the Sense of *St. Paul*, we shall easily be satisfy'd by having Recourse to the 16th Verse of this Chapter; where he blames it in the *Judaizing Christians*, that they had respect to *an Holy Day, the New Moons, and the Sabbaths*. The Observation of these was indeed significant and useful, 'till the Time that our Saviour appear'd; of which Appearance they were the Types and Shadows, v. 17. But, now He is *come in the Flesh*, these Observances have lost their Significancy and Obligation; and the Keeping them can imply Nothing else, than a blameable and superstitious *Will-Worship*.

To sum up all; Reasonable and decent Circumstances in Divine Worship, whether prescribed by ourselves, or impos'd by lawful Authority; Free and spontaneous Acts of Piety; and the Use of proper and significant Ceremonies in God's Service, cannot be included under the Title of culpable *Will-Worship*, as it

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is lay'd down by *St Paul* in this Chapter. The Actions which he condemns in those Sects, against whom this Epistle was written, we have found by the Context to have been, The Adding to the Object of Worship; The Urging Obedience to certain Observances, as the Commandments of God, which either never had been such, or else had been abrogated and done away; The Insisting on some Rules of Severity and Abstinence, as necessary to Salvation, which God had not declar'd to be so; And, Lastly, The superstitious Observation of certain *Jewish* Ordinances, which were of no Obligation after the Coming of *Christ*. In these, according to *St Paul's* Doctrine, consists the Nature of *Will-Worship*, so far as it ought to be reckon'd unlawful.

Having thus, at large, clear'd up this obscure Passage, and shewn what *Will-Worship* is, from the only certain Standard of Truth, the reveal'd Word of God, and that too, from the only Part and Place of that Word, where the Name or Nature of *Will-Worship* occurs, I go on to my Second General Head, namely, to make some brief Application of what hath been said, to those Societies of *Christians*, who are wont to asperse and inveigh against their Brethren's Forms and Ways of Worship, and to traduce them as culpable and unlawful *Will-Worship*.

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It is the Misfortune of the Establish'd Church of *England*, that, tho' she is blest'd with a Liturgy and Form of Worship, the purest perhaps, which the whole *Christian* World hath ever seen, She yet suffers under the Reproach and Calumny of *Will-Worship*; And this Reproach is thrown upon her by such, as, within her own Borders, withdraw from her Communion.

Some of our Rites and Ceremonies being of human indeed, but yet most primitive and even *Apostolical* Institution, have been calumniated, by our Brethren of the Separation, under the Name of *Will-Worship*; And, for Want of more material Objections, they have taken Hold of this Text of *St Paul*, to cast an Odium on our Form of Worship; They assert, that no Rite can be lawfully us'd, but what hath been either commanded, or practis'd by *Christ*; and that, whatever others shall be introduc'd, they ought to be rejected, as being forbidden by *St Paul* in this Text.

But surely, they who make this Objection argue only in the Dark, and throw Dirt at Random. The Charge of culpable *Will-Worship* in our Service, grounded on this Text of *St Paul*, can only come from such Men, as are plainly ignorant, what it is that our Apostle here means by *Will-Worship*, and who have never been at the Pains to examine this Text, and to discover the true Sense of it.

We

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We have at large made it appear, that decent Circumstances in Divine Worship, and proper and significant Ceremonies and Rites, are not, according to *St Paul*, in any wise to be included under the Name of *Will-Worship*. We have shewn, that the *Will-Worship* to which *St Paul* opposes himself, consists in adding to the Object of Worship; in urging Obedience to certain Ordinances, as the Commands of God, which he hath not commanded; in insisting on Points of Severity and Abstinence, as necessary to Salvation, which God hath not made necessary; and in retaining a superstitious Observance of certain *Jewish* Ordinances, which have been of no Force since the Coming of *Christ*.

This being the Nature of *Will-Worship* according to *St Paul*, it is amazing with what Pretence, or Shew of Reason and Truth, a Charge of *Will-Worship* can be thrown on our publick Service. Can it be pretended, that We have added to the Object of Divine Worship; or that We adore any other Being than God only? Can it be suggested, that we impose any of our Ordinances as the Commands of God, when He hath not commanded them? Do we not Declare, that Rites and Ceremonies are not esteem'd by us, as essential Parts of God's Worship? Do We insist on any Severities and Mortifications, as necessary to Sal-

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vation, beyond what the Gospel makes fo? Do We retain any superstitious Observances of *Jewish* Origin? Surely, our Brethren themselves cannot but acquit us from any Charge of such Practices; and therefore, they cannot but acquit us from any Charge of *Will-Worship*.

And, as we thus stand clear from this Charge with respect to ourselves, so we may also with a much better Grace, and with the utmost Truth and Reason, retort this Charge, and fix it at the Door of the Pretended-Catholick Church of *Rome*. That Church hath undoubtedly made herself guilty of this culpable *Will-Worship*, in almost every part of it; as the Apostle hath here describ'd it. She hath manifestly added to the Object of Divine Worship, in adoring departed Saints, Images and Relicks; nay, She hath added to it, even in that very Instance, which *St Paul* here condemns, and which was practis'd by those very Sects, against whom his Discourse was directed, viz. in the Worshipping of Angels. She hath moreover urg'd Obedience to certain Ordinances, as the Commandments of God, which certainly never were such. She hath farther dogmatiz'd, and impos'd certain Rules of Severity and Abstinence, which have never been declar'd necessary by the Law of God; and this She hath done, by injoining *Celibacy* to the Clergy;

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Clergy; — the Vows of Chastity and Poverty to the Monkish Orders; — and ridiculous Penances, as Commutations for Sin. And, Lastly, the several absurd Ceremonies in her Service, and the Rites of her Worship, which have no Significancy, and tend to no Edification, are Demonstrations of her Superstition, and plain Characters of a culpable *Will-Worship*. But, I shall not any farther pursue this Subject; my chief Design in this Discourse, Not being to enter on Disputes in Religion, but rather to inform your Judgments, Wherein the Sin of *Will-Worship* doth consist; and to dissuade you from the Practice of it. And this naturally leads me

In the Last Place, To close the whole with a few Inferences of a practical Nature, and to point out the Duties arising from this Subject.

And here First, Let us have a principal Care and Caution, that our Service of God be entirely free from Superstition and *Will-Worship*. How displeasing to God all Tendencies of that Kind are, we may judge by the severe Rebukes and Reprimands, which our Saviour hath bestow'd on the Sect of the *Pharisees*. God requires at our Hands a decent, plain, and reasonable Worship; and whatsoever exceeds that, is, in Scripture Language, *the Sacrifice of Fools*. Yet, whilst we are thus rightly cautious in guarding against Superstition, let us not be

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led away by Noise and Clamour to reject all such Usages, as superstitious, which the blind and ignorant Zeal of some Men shall presume to call so. In this Case, let us be determin'd by the Antiquity, the Reasonableness, the Decency and Usefulness of such Rites; and from thence, let us direct our Consciences to the Practice and Use of them.

Secondly, and to have done; With respect to our Brethren and Fellow *Christians*, Whatever our private Sentiments may be concerning their Ways of worshipping God, it is yet our indispensable Duty to forbear reproachful Terms. Censuring, and Judging hardly are not fit for *Christians*, since every Servant is to stand or fall, as his Master *Christ* shall judge him. Let us, on no Pretence whatsoever, exceed the Bounds of Charity. Let our own Weaknesses and Failings deter us from condemning other Men. Let us inform the Ignorant, and direct the Erroneous; But let this be always done in the proper Spirit of *Christianity*, the Spirit of Meekness.



SERMON

SERMON XV.

ROM. IX. 17.

*The Scripture saith unto Pharaoh,
even for this same Purpose have I
rais'd thee up, that I might shew
my Power in thee, and that my
Name might be declar'd through-
out all the Earth.*

THis Passage of Scripture, by the wrong
Constructions which have been some-
times put upon it, hath prov'd of the
most dangerous and destructive Con-
sequence to Men's Souls. To the Generality
of Men it hath seem'd to intimate, that God
rais'd up *Pharaoh*, and plac'd him on the Throne
of *Egypt* with no other View, than the mani-
festing his own Power and Greatness in his
Overthrow; that he created him to be an Ob-
ject of Wrath, and a Vessel fitted to Destru-
ction; that he exalted him to this Honour,
that his Fall might be the more conspicuous;

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that by the Decree of God himself he was to sin; and, in consequence of that Sin, to incur the Plagues which fell on him and his People, and to which, Nothing but his Death could put a Period.

Were this allow'd to be the genuine Sense of this Text, it would unavoidably make God guilty of such a Proceeding with *Pharaoh*, as is entirely inconsistent with Goodness and Justice: It would apparently make him guilty of the greatest Cruelty, in raising up a Prince with the sole View of making him miserable, — a Sport of his Wrath and Anger, and the wretched Object of his irresistible and relentless Power.

This weak, and mistaken Interpretation of this Text, (for such, I hope, I shall hereafter prove it to be,) hath however furnish'd some Men with an Excuse and Cloak for their Voluntary Sins; and, from this ill-judg'd Case of *Pharaoh*, they have taken the Liberty to lay the Guilt of them on God himself; — to imagine, that he sometimes necessitates Sin in Men; — that he decrees their Fall, and creates some Persons merely with an Eye to magnify his Power in their Destruction.

Nor do some Sinners stop even here: They have been led to think, from this Dealing with *Pharaoh*, and some Consequences deducible from it, that in many other Cases, the Proceedings

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ceedings of God with Men, are not strictly conformable to the proper Rules of Goodness and Justice. They imagine, for Instance, that it would have been more becoming the Goodness of God, to have created him, and every other Man, altogether incapable of Sinning, than to have made him capable of falling into it; that it would have been a nobler Instance of his Divine Mercy and Goodness, Not to withdraw his Grace from the obstinate Sinner, (as He did here from this obdurate King of *Egypt*;) — Not to leave him naked and defenceless; — but rather to enlarge the Influences of his Spirit, as these Influences became more necessary, and so to force and restrain Men from sinning: Lastly, that it is not consistent with his impartial Justice, to inflict eternal Punishment, and never-ending Anguish for temporary and finite Sin.

These several Suppositions, having been receiv'd as true, and taken for granted, have administer'd Occasion to impenitent Sinners, to excuse themselves in the Commission of Wickedness; and at the same Time, to charge God foolishly, and to impute their Failures to his Want of Goodness and Justice.

It being therefore my Design, in this Discourse, to clear up and vindicate the Perfections of God in all these his Proceedings with Sinners, which have been look'd on to be most

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unaccountable, and which may be thought to need some Explication; and it being my Purpose to shew, How weakly these Objections are made by the Sinner, and of what little Service they will be towards his Excuse; I have chosen to introduce it, and to prepare the Way to it, with clearing That, which seems the most difficult and most liable to Exception, the Case of *Pharaoh*, as it seems to be stated in the Text; and which, at first View, may seem to argue a Partiality and hard Dealing on God's Side.

It is in this Text so expressly said, that God raised him up with a Purpose of shewing his Power in him; and it is so often declar'd in the Book of *Exodus*, that God harden'd *Pharaoh's Heart*, that he should not let the Children of Israel go, that it must be confess'd, there is in these Expressions, a very strong Appearance of Truth on the Side of That Exposition of this Text, which supposes, that God, in the most literal Sense, raised up *Pharaoh*, with an Intention to necessitate his Sinning; and as a Punishment for that Sin, to overthrow and destroy him. But, upon strict Examination, I hope, it will appear, that this is far from being the true Sense of these Words; and that it will be found, that the Dealings of God with *Pharaoh* were nicely just and equal.

To make this evident, I shall, First, give
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an Account of this Matter of Fact, as it is related in Scripture; and from thence we shall be able to judge, How far God *hardened the Heart of Pharaoh*, or How far *Pharaoh* himself was culpable in this Matter.

Secondly, I shall lay before You the true Import of the Words of my Text, in which God is said *to have raised up Pharaoh for this very Purpose*; by which it will appear, that they will evidently bear another Interpretation, and a very different Construction from that usually put on them, and which hath made them seem so derogatory to God's Goodness and Justice.

In the First Place then, to clear God's seeming hard Dealing, when He is said *to have hardened the Heart of Pharaoh*, let us take an Account of this Matter, as it is related in holy Scripture; and from thence we shall be able to judge, How far God acted, and How far *Pharaoh* himself was culpable in this Affair.

At first then, God shewed Miracles and Signs before *Pharaoh*; [*Exod. 7. v. 10.*] but, because the Magicians of *Egypt* did the same with their Enchantments, it follows, that *Pharaoh's Heart was hardened*; not, you see, by God, but by himself. After this, God proceeds to the Judgment of turning their Water into Blood; *v. 16.* And, because the Magicians did the same, it is said *v. 23*, that *Pharaoh did not set his Heart*

to

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to this also. Still, you see, it is *Pharaoh*, and not God, to whom this Hard'ning is ascrib'd. Then follows the Plague of Frogs; [*Exod. 8. v. 4.*] but neither had this any Effect on him; for, the Sequel informs us, that when this Plague was remov'd at the Prayer of *Moses*, and *Pharaoh* saw that there was Respite, it is expressly said, that he *hardened his own Heart*. This was follow'd by the Plague of Lice: Here his Magicians fail'd him; and yet it is averr'd *v. 19.* that *his Heart was hardened, and he hardened not*. The next Plague that succeeded, was that of Flies; and in this it is observable, that God did more towards softening his Heart, than he had hitherto done: For, *v. 22.* it is said, that *to the End that he might know*, i. e. might be sensible of his Sin and Folly, God added this Sign, that there were no Flies found in the Land of Goshen, but only in Egypt: Yet, when this Plague was remov'd, we are inform'd, that *Pharaoh hardened his Heart this Time also*, *v. 32.* Upon this, God sends a Murrain, to as little Purpose as the former Plagues; for, we still read, that *Pharaoh hardened his Heart, and would not let Israel go as the Lord commanded*.

Thus far you observe, *Pharaoh's* Heart is hardened by himself; and God is not said to have effected it at all. Upon the next Plague indeed, That of the Boils and Blains, and which

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was the *Seventh* of the *Ten*, the Style of the Scripture is alter'd; and whereas, 'till that Time, *Pharaoh* is said to have hardened his Heart himself, from thenceforward it is said, that *God hardened his Heart*. From which Account it appears, that (if we may form a Judgment of this Matter, from the Scripture-Relation of it,) *Pharaoh* was himself the first Hardener of his Heart; that he continu'd to be so, during the first Six Plagues; that God did not effect it, since it is every where attributed to *Pharaoh* alone; and that, when at last it is said, that *God hardened his Heart*, this was no otherwise done, than as He gave him up to follow his former Devices; — gave no Opportunity or Place for Repentance; — withdrew his Grace from him, after no less than Six Tryals, by so many severe Plagues, and yet all ineffectual.

This then, is the Case of *Pharaoh*, according to the Scripture; which yet hath been so severely represented on the Part of God. His tender Mercy had waited for him no less than Six Times; His Offers of Mercy had been rejected; and Where then was the Hardship in God's Rejecting him? It is a sufficient Vindication of God's Goodness, that he had many and frequent Tenders of Relief: But since he thought fit to despise them, it could not be any Reflection on God, that He withdrew his Grace;

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Grace; — that He left him to his own Devices; that, by this means, his Heart grew hardened; and that he permitted him to fall from one Wickedness to another, by affording him no Means, by which he might have been preserv'd; and thus *consequently* and *eventually*, rather than *actually* and *positively*, hardening his Heart.

This is, I presume, sufficient to clear the Justice of God in this Proceeding with *Pharaoh*, so far forth, as God is said in Scripture to harden his Heart. But, it will be ask'd, after What Manner shall we vindicate Him from the great Difficulty still behind, and which is contain'd in the Words of my Text; by which God is declar'd to have *rais'd him up for this very Purpose, that He might shew his Power in him, and that His Name might be declar'd throughout all the Earth*. This Vindication was what I propos'd, by shewing You, in

The Second Place, the true Import and Sense of these Words; by which it will appear, that they must evidently bear another Interpretation, and a very different Construction from That usually put on them, and which hath made them so derogatory from God's Justice and Goodness.

To clear this Matter it must be observ'd, that the *Greek Word* * in this Place *ἐξυπακούει*,

* See *Kuster's Gr. Test.* *Hammond, Whisby, and Synopsis Cris. in Loc.*

which

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which is here render'd [*raised thee up,*] doth not always signify a *Raising up* by Way of Production, Creation or Constitution; as if the Sense of this Passage must necessarily be, that "This was my sole Design in making thee King of *Egypt*; — in placing thee on that Throne; — in giving thee that Kingdom, that I might shew my arbitrary Power and unrestrain'd Dominion in thy Ruin." This is not the true Import of the Word *ἐγείρω* in this Place; but it ought to be here understood in that Sense, in which it frequently occurs in other Parts of Scripture; and that is, a Recovering from Danger; — a Delivering from Sicknes; — or a Preserving and Defending from any impending Calamity.

So the Word *ἐγείρω* signifies in the fifth Chapter of St James, v. 15. where it is said, that *the Prayer of Faith shall save the Sick, and The Lord shall raise him up*, *ἐγείρει αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος*, i. e. shall recover him from his Sicknes; the very same Word with that in the Text, and which therefore will bear the same Interpretation.

The genuine Import therefore of this difficult Expression in my Text [*for this Cause have I raised thee up,*] is none other than this; For this Cause have I preserved thee alive; — have I protected and defended thee from all my Plagues which I have sent; and have hitherto spar'd thy Life; altho' for thy many and repeated

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peated Sins, and for thy obstinately hardening thy Heart against me, thou wer't fit to be deliver'd up to instant Ruin long before.

The Interpretation which I have given of the Word *ἐγείρω*, here render'd [to raise up,] and which I make to signify, *a Preserving him alive*, is further confirm'd by the Original *Hebrew* Text, and by the best Translators and Commentators. In the *ninth* Chapter of *Exodus*, v. 10th, (from which Place this Passage is quoted by St Paul in my Text,) the *Hebrew* signifies, *I have made thee to stand*. The *Greek* Version of the *Seventy* hath it, *For this Cause hast thou been kept*. The *Chaldee* Paraphrase hath it, *I have kept thee alive*. The *Syriack* and *Arabick* Versions are to the same Purpose. The *Latin* Version, *Feci ut superstes maneres*. And Lastly, this is alledg'd to be the Sense of that Passage in *Exodus*, both by the *Jews* themselves, and the best of *Christians* who have commented on it.

From all which it now appearing, that the true Interpretation of the Passage in my Text, is not, (as some would have it,) that God created *Pharaoh* on Purpose, or made him King of *Egypt* with a Design to shew his own Power in his Ruin; — but that He preserv'd his Life from the Plagues; — that He respited his Vengeance from falling on him, when he deserv'd it; and put off his evil Day, 'till it should be more

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more for God's Glory to punish him. This, I say, being unquestionably the Design and Meaning of the Apostle in this Passage of Scripture, it will follow, that this Proceeding of God with *Pharaoh* was so far from being hard or severe, that it was in Truth a Mercy and Favour towards him; insomuch as He defer'd the executing that Vengeance, which he had merited; — as He put off his Punishment when his Sins had been long ripe for it; and as instead of instantly adjudging him to the Torments of another World, (which his Hardness of Heart had deserv'd,) He suffer'd him to live, rais'd him up, preserv'd his Life from the several Plagues, and permitted him to survive, in a Condition highly preferable to that, which he enter'd on at his Death.

Having thus at large clear'd and vindicated the Proceedings of God with Relation to *Pharaoh*, (which, it must be own'd, carry'd some Appearance of Hardship, and requir'd a close Examination;) and having hereby shewn, How weakly the Case of that Prince hath been drawn into Example, and argu'd from, as an Excuse for Sin, or charging the Guilt of it on God; I go on, according to my first Design, to vindicate the Proceedings of God with obdurate Sinners in other Respects, nearly ally'd to, and usually deduc'd from the Case of *Pharaoh*; — to answer such Objections, as they

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have rais'd against his Justice; and to shew, how vain and groundless are all their Pleas for their Sins, as far as they relate to the Administrations of God, and his Providence.

Two good Effects may be hop'd from such a Discourse: The One, that the Dispensations of Providence, which to these Men seem irregular, unequal, and partial, will be shewn to be the Reverse of these; to be strictly equal and impartial, and exactly conformable to the nicest Rules of Justice. This will abundantly clear the Honour of God, which, to all Persons so perswaded, suffers under the Imputation of Injustice. The Other good Effect to be hop'd for from a Discourse on this Subject, is, that when the Sinner shall be convinc'd on how weak Foundations he builds, how void of Strength his Objections are, and how trifling his Excuses, a Sight of this may bring him to a right Mind. The Hopes of this leads me to an Examination of the several Objections, which I shall reduce, at present, to these Three;

1. Then, the Creating *Pharaoh*; and every other Man capable of committing Sin, and for that, liable and obnoxious to Punishment, hath been objected against the Goodness and Benevolence of God. Men imagine, that it would be more becoming God's Goodness, more worthy his universal Love, to have created Man

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altogether incapable of Sinning, than to have made him subject to it, and apt to transgress. They argue, that a Being of infinite Goodness is concern'd to make every Creature as good, as perfect, and as happy, as it can. Man, it must be own'd, would have been a Creature much more Noble, and Perfect than he now is, had he been exempted from Sin, or plac'd above the Power of committing it. But, as this is not done; as we are made capable of Sinning, and too easily fall into the Snare, it should seem, that the Goodness of God hath herein been deficient, and not given us that Perfection which it might have done.

2. The Withdrawing the Assistance of Divine Grace from obstinate and habitual Sinners, hath been thought to be not consistent with God's infinite Mercy; and it hath been suggested, that it would be a nobler Instance of Divine Mercy, if God did Not thus leave the Sinner naked and defenceless; but would so strengthen the Influences of his *Holy Spirit* on him, as forceably to restrain him from Sin, and irresistably carry him on to the opposite Practices.

3. It hath been affirm'd, that the Eternity of the Torments allotted for the Unrighteous, is absolutely irreconcilable with the Justice of God; that, in Strictness of Justice, the Punishment ought to be proportioned to the

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Crime; and that temporal Vengeance is a sufficient Compensation for a temporal Crime. These several Suppositions having been receiv'd as true, have administer'd Occasion to impenitent Sinners to excuse themselves in their Commission of Wickedness, and at the same Time to charge God foolishly, by imputing their voluntary Failures to His Want of Goodness, Mercy and Justice.

The First of these Objections, of which I undertake to shew the Weakness, is that of God's Creating Man capable of committing Sin, and for that, liable and obnoxious to Punishment; Upon which it is affirm'd, that it would have been more becoming God's Goodness, more worthy his universal Love, to have created Man altogether incapable of Sin, than to have made him subject to it, and apt to transgress.

In Answer, let it be consider'd, that Man indeed would have been a much Nobler Creature, had he been produc'd in a State exempt, from Sin, and been plac'd in a Condition above the Reach of Folly and Imperfection. But, a little Thought and Reflection will shew us, that this could not possibly be the State and Condition of a Creature. For, to imagine, that God should constitute any of his Creatures so, as to make them incapable of Sinning, were to imagine, that He should bestow

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on them Infinite Perfection; no less than Infinite Perfection being able to secure us from a Capacity and Possibility of Sinning. The very Notion we have of a Creature, must imply, that it is liable to some Imperfections. No Nature but the Divine, is intrinsically secur'd from them. Imperfections therefore, being inseparable from the Nature of a Creature, Man's being created capable of Sinning, can be no Reflection on, or Derogation from the Goodness of God.

But farther, Man being created a rational Being, (which carries with it a Dignity and Perfection highly preferable to the Want of Reason,) it follows, that he must be endow'd with a Faculty of Choice, as being suppos'd and included in the Faculty of Reason. He had a Rule of Life prescrib'd him by his Creator. He had an Understanding impowering him to reason on that Rule. He had a Will given him, whereby to determine his Actions: And those Actions were to be the Evidence of his Obedience or Disobedience. This being his State, it must necessarily suppose him to be made capable of Sinning. For, why should God prescribe to him a Rule, if at the same Time he were by Nature incapable of deviating from it? To what End should He endue him with Reason, and a voluntary Choice, were it not in his Power to chuse Good or

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Evil? To what purpose did He bestow on him Understanding, if his Hands were tied up by a Necessity of Acting? Thus all the Faculties of human Nature, suppose him to be such an Agent, as must be entirely inconsistent with his being created incapable of Sinning.

But, it hath further been objected, that, granting what we have just now prov'd, that Man could not be created incapable of Sinning, yet it would have been very becoming and worthy the Divine Goodness, to have sustain'd and preserv'd him, by the Almighty Power, from sinking under the Temptations, giving Way to the Allurements, and actually falling into Sin; especially since eternal Damnation was to be the Consequence of his so falling.

We answer, that the Goodness of God is sufficiently clear'd and vindicated, in that Man was created in a State of Happiness, and might, (if he had pleas'd,) have continu'd in it for ever. To which we may add, that the Glory of God is more advanc'd, and the Attributes of his Wisdom, his Justice, nay his Goodness itself are more display'd by his Leaving Men to a Freedom of Acting, than they could have been, had He impos'd on them an inevitable Necessity of doing Good, or render'd them totally incapable of falling into Sin. For, all the before-mention'd Perfections of God's Nature,

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ture, his Wisdom, his Justice, and his Goodness have more eminently display'd themselves, and been exemplify'd with greater Lustre in the Incarnation, and Death of The Son of God for our Redemption from the Punishment of Sin, than they could have been, had Man never fallen, and that Incarnation never happen'd.

2. What hath been said being sufficient to vindicate the Goodness of God in creating Man capable of Sinning, I proceed to the Second Objection I was to speak to, which relates to God's withdrawing his Grace from harden'd Sinners. This hath been thought inconsistent with his Infinite Mercy; and it hath been suggested, that it would be a nobler Instance of the Divine-Mercy, if God did Not thus leave the Sinner naked and defenceless, but would so strengthen the Influences of his Grace on him, as forceably to restrain him from Sin, and irresistably carry him to the opposite Practice.

A distinct and particular View of the several Causes and Motives, by which God is induc'd to withdraw his Assistance, and without which we should be always under it's Influence, will effectually shew the Weakness and Unreasonableness of this Objection; and abundantly convince us, that in thus leaving us without the Help of his Grace, He does not proceed

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in a Manner, either unreasonable or unmerciful.

For, in the First Place, God never withdraws his Grace from us, 'till, by repeated Sins, and frequent Pollutions we have render'd ourselves unfit for it's further Continuance, and are become Subjects unqualify'd for it's Operations. To a Continuance of God's Grace it is necessary, that we continue to be fit Receptacles of it. To this End we must purify our Hearts, keep our Minds unpolluted with sinful Lusts and Appetites, and cleanse our Thoughts from all evil Affections. The *Holy Spirit* of God cannot make his Abode with Sin and Wickedness; cannot fix his Residence in such disagreeable Company; or delight in a Seat so vilely inhabited. The pure, the upright, but especially the humble are the fittest Theaters for that God, who hath been pleas'd to declare, that *He will resist the proud, and give Grace to the humble.*

The beautiful Parable of our Saviour recorded in the *Eighth Chap.* of *St Luke*, as well as other Places of Scripture, concerning the Sower of Seed, gives us to understand, that if we, as good Ground, give a suitable Nourishment, and afford the proper Helps for the Growth of the Seed, it will spring, and bear Fruit, even to an Hundred-fold; it will be a *Fountain of living Water, springing up to eter-*

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nal Life. But, on the other Hand, if we are negligent in this Affair; if we do not cultivate and encourage the heavenly Guest, we have no Reason to blame The Almighty for our being depriv'd of his Assistance, when it was our own infatuated Behaviour that caus'd this Deprivation.

In the Second Place, God never withdraws his Grace, 'till we are stupidly negligent of it's Motions, and are so careless, as to add Nothing of our own Endeavours. The Divine Assistance cooperating with Man, is That Talent committed to his Charge, which must not be hidden, but employ'd; is what we should put into the Hands of the Changers, that when our Lord shall demand it, he may receive it with Usury. And, as we all desire to be of the Number of those good and faithful Servants, who shall at the last great Day be bid *Enter into the Joy of their Lord*, we must first take Care to be in this Life what our Saviour terms, *Faithful in a few Things*, and employ his heavenly Gifts in Ways the most advantageous. The Divine Assistance is, in a Word, that burning Lamp, which must continually be trimm'd, must carefully be attended on, and; from Time to Time, receive the necessary Supplies by our own Cooperation. But, if we ourselves are deficient herein, the Justice and

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and Mercy of God will stand clear of all Imputation, and we alone must be responsible for the dreadful Consequence.

Lastly, God never withdraws his Grace, 'till by our habitual, and presumptuous Sins; — 'till by our wilfully Obstructing it's Influences; and by an obstinate and continu'd Resistance to it's Motions, we have deaden'd it's Force, and render'd it ineffectual. If we transgress frequently, knowingly, and willingly, God cannot but be displeased at us. For the Sins of Infirmary, and those which we commit thro' Inadvertence, or the Frailty of human Nature, do not so far provoke The Almighty, as to put us out of His Assistance.

The Sins of *Moses*, of *Aaron*, of *David*, and *St Peter*, (tho' some of them of a very enormous Nature,) yet did not altogether extinguish the Grace of God in them. They were enabled to see their Folly, and to repent. They were again renew'd in Righteousness, and died in a final Perseverance under the Grace they had receiv'd.

The Patience, and Long-Suffering of God towards Sinners is very great. *Tho' He be provoked every Day*, yet The *Psalmist* assures us, *He is strong, and patient*. He sees his Grace resisted; and yet is content to wait the Transgressors Leisure, if possibly he may return to
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a Sense of his Duty. But, at last, even this Forbearance of God becomes tir'd. *He will not always strive with Man*; He will discontinue these his Favours: And when his Grace hath been long rejected, he then in Vengeance rejects the Offender. He permits him to go on in filling up the Measure of his Iniquity. He withdraws his Grace; and as his Designs in conferring it have been all along render'd abortive, He no more vouchsafes what is too precious to be cast away.

These are the Reasons and Motives, for which God withdraws his Grace from the Sinner. And let even the Sinner himself (when in a cool and serious Temper,) be Judge, Whether there be in this Proceeding the least Appearance of Hardship. God deserts not Man, 'till Man hath deserted God. And, when this is the Case, All becomes Folly on our part, without the least Appearance of Unmercifulness on God's. There is no Reason why we should expect, that God should wait on us for ever: But it is a sufficient Demonstration of his Goodness and Mercy, that we have had many Tenders of his Grace; and that it hath been long in our Power to close with and embrace it. But, since we have obstinately refus'd, God may, without the Imputation of Cruelty, leave off these his unsuccessful Endeavours

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vours, and give him over to follow his own Devices.

3. I proceed now to the Third and Last Objection against the Proceedings of God with the Sinner, taken from the Eternity of future Punishment. The endless Duration of the Torments of the Damn'd, hath been represented as absolutely inconsistent, both with the Justice, and Mercy of God. It hath been averr'd, that in Strictness of Justice, the Punishment ought to be proportion'd to the Crime; and that a temporal Vengeance is a sufficient Compensation for temporal Sins.

This indeed would be an unanswerable Difficulty, were not all our Sins the Effect of our own Choice, but impos'd on us by hard Fate, and an uncontrollable Necessity. It would indeed be highly unjust to punish us eternally for acting what we could not prevent. But here the Case is far otherwise. Both the Rewards and Punishments are first propos'd to our Choice. And surely, it is no Breach of Justice, first to set before Men Life, and Death, — and then to deal with them according to that Election which they freely make.

Let us illustrate this by an Example drawn from holy Scripture. King *Solomon* had pardoned the treasonable Practices of *Shimei*; and had given him his Life upon Condition,
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that he should never be found without the City Walls. *Shimei* gladly accepted the Offer, and term'd it a good Saying, i. e. a kinder Treatment than he expected. But yet, unmindful of his Promise, he ventur'd to break this Condition; upon which he was condemn'd and executed. No Man certainly can affirm, that he had hard Measure; because, tho' the Going out of the City might in itself be a slight Matter, yet we are to remember, that these were the Terms on which his Life had before been given him, and that he himself brake the Condition he had gladly accepted. The Application of this Instance to God's Justice in punishing eternally our temporal Sins, is so obvious, that I shall leave every Hearer to make it for himself.

I might farther observe, that the inflicting infinite Punishment in Recompence of finite Sin, is in no wise inconsistent with, nor any Violation of The Almighty's Justice, since the Rewards of Virtue are as well eternal as the Punishments of Vice. Had God so order'd it, that the Recompence of the Good should be finite, and the Punishment of the Evil infinite, This might have seem'd somewhat hard; because, on this Supposition, the Observance of God's Law would not have been so advantageous, as the Breach of it would have been detri-

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detrimental. But, as it is now settl'd, and the Reward on the one hand is made equal to the Punishment on the other, all Appearance of Injustice vanishes: And surely That Man deserves no Pity, who had it in his Power to have gain'd as much, as by his own Folly and Wickedness he hath lost.

Others there are, who object against the Eternity of future Punishment, by appealing to God's infinite Mercy. They are induc'd to think, that since God so often declares himself inclin'd to Mercy, and that he hath no Pleasure in the Death of him that dyeth, He will, after a certain Space of Time spent in Torment, release the damned, and call them to a State of Ease and Comfort.

But, the great Error of such Reasoners lies in This; that whilst they magnify One Attribute of God, they forget the rest, and endeavour to raise his Mercy on the Ruins of his Wisdom. God is the supreme Judge, and Governour of the World; and, as such, concern'd to support the Authority of his Laws. Punishment therefore would be due to the Wicked, tho' Nothing of that Kind had been expressly threaten'd; because the same Wisdom which gave these Laws is concern'd to support them. But, when we consider that eternal, never-ending Punishment is, in plain Words, threaten'd

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en'd to unrepenting Sinners, What Way is there to escape them consistently either with the Truth or Wisdom of The Almighty? And if Men perish for ever, it is not owing to any Defect of Mercy on God's Part. Wisdom requires, He should, in this Case, execute full Vengeance, and leave Men to those Miseries, which they might have avoided, but would not avoid in Season.

Thus have I finish'd what I propos'd in this Discourse; which was to clear and vindicate the Proceedings of God with Sinners; and especially in those Respects, which seem'd most liable to Exception. The Parts I have spoken to, (and especially the Case of *Pharaoh*;) are those, which have been thought to bear hardest on the Wicked; and, in which it hath been conceiv'd, the Dealings of The Almighty have been less conformable to Equity and Mercy. Yet, I hope, satisfactory Solutions have now been given to all these; and that the Honour of God is hereby establish'd, by removing from it those several Imputations.

From hence then let us learn to forsake Sin, in whose Excuse so little can be Pleaded, and which is so destitute of all rational Pretence or Plea. To this good Effect let us add this Caution, That we charge not the Proceedings of God with any seeming Injustice, when it is

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so certain, that they are all clear from it. Let us not compel Him to reason with us, as He doth with the *Jews* in the Prophecy of *Ezekiel*, *Hear ye now, O House of Israel, Are not my Ways equal, are not your Ways unequal?* But let us rather be assur'd, in the Words of the *Psalmist*, that *The Lord is righteous in all his Ways, and holy in all his Works.*



NON SERMON

 SERMON XVI.

I JOHN III. 9.

Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin; for his Seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

THE State of Regeneration, *the being born of God, and the becoming the Sons of God*, hath in the sacred Writings very great *Encomiums* bestow'd on it, and is attended with the highest, and most valuable Privileges. It is indeed represented as a State of little less than Perfection; as that, in which Sin and Evil have no Power; as an almost total Exemption from Defects and Weakness, and in which there is an entire Subjection of the Flesh to the Spirit. The regenerate Man is describ'd as a perfect Master in all Virtues; — as superior to all the Infirmities of human Nature; and as above the Reach of Stain and Pollution. Thus we are inform'd in the *Fifth* Chapter of this Epistle;

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v. 4. That *Whatsoever is born of God, overcometh the World*; at v. 18. of the same Chap. That *Whosoever is born of God, sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God, keepeth himself, and That Wicked one toucheth him not*: At Verse 6th of the Third Chapter of this Epistle, the Apostle affirms, That *Whosoever abideth in God, sinneth not*; and most emphatically, in the Words of my Text, That *Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin; for his Seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.*

This is the State of *Regeneration*, as it is describ'd by this inspir'd Writer: So guiltless of Sin are those, who are truly *born of God*: And, so innocent and unspotted are his real, and genuine Sons!

This Account of the Condition of regenerate Persons, is, no doubt, a Foundation of the greatest spiritual Comfort, and the most solid Satisfaction to those *Christians*, to whom it belongs; and affords them a Delight the highest that can be enjoy'd on this Side Heaven. Whereas, on the other Hand, to such as are conscious of their Not being in this State, to those who find themselves under the Slavery of Sin, and hurry'd into frequent and repeated A&S of it, it hath provid the Occasion of great Dread and Trouble.

When they find *Regeneration* represented, as a State, in which a Man *doth not commit Sin*,
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and cannot commit it, they easily persuade themselves, that they are Not so regenerate, — are Not the Sons of God, nor born of Him; because they are experimentally sensible of their frequent sinning, — are conscious of their Wickedness, and know themselves to be continually liable to Offences. Thus it happens, that those holy Scriptures, which were written for our Consolation, do accidentally become the Source of Uneasiness; — furnish us with Matter of Disquietude; and instead of closing and healing our Wounds, give Rise and Nourishment to them.

I propose therefore, in this Discourse, to explain this Text of Scripture; to give You it's true and genuine Sense; and then to shew, that it affords no sufficient Ground for such Fears in Men's Minds.

The Words to be consider'd are These; *Whoſoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin; for his Seed remaineth in him; and he cannot ſin, becauſe he is born of God.* These indeed, at first View, seem to exclude no less than the whole Race of Mankind, and every single Man from being in a State of *Regeneration*; They seem to imply, that no Man is truly *born of God*, or a Child of God; because there is no Man, who cannot, who actually doth not offend. If a sinless Obedience be a necessary Effect of *Christian Regeneration*, it is plain, that no Man

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is regenerate; because no Man performs such a sinless Obedience. If perfect Holiness, and an Exemption from Sin be the Characteristick of a Child of God, it will follow, that of all the Children of Men no One is a Child of God; there being amongst us No such perfect Holiness, No such Exemption from Sin. If *to be born of God, is not to commit Sin*, (which surely is no Man's Condition,) then, on the other Hand, *To commit Sin*, (which we are certain is every Man's Condition,) is *Not to be born of God*, nor truly regenerate. If it be laid down, (as in the Text it seems to be,) that a regenerate Person cannot commit Sin, Men's own Consciences will naturally lead them to draw that Consequence, which will plainly follow from it, viz. That *Whoever commits Sin, cannot be regenerate*.

And indeed, the Apostle himself seems to have made the same Inference from this Proposition, which our Fears prompt us to make. For, after he had said (agreeably to the Sense of my Text,) at the 6th verse of this Chapter, that *Whosoever abideth in God, sinneth not*; he immediately, and in the very next Words, subjoins, that *Whosoever sinneth, hath not seen God, neither known him*. Thus, according to the obvious Sense of this Text, None of us hath any Title to the being a Child of God; None of us is truly a regenerate Person; and None

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of us hath a Claim to, what *Christians* are frequently allow'd in Scripture, the Grace and Favour of the Almighty.

Most deplorable then are our Circumstances: For, if we are Not *born of God*, (and our Frequency in sinning, is, according to this Apostle, a Demonstration that we are not,) it is but too easy to tell, of whom we are born. The Scripture acknowledges no Middle between the Children of God and the Children of the Devil. And if, upon the foregoing Supposition, we have no Title to the former, this may very reasonably awaken our Fears, and put us under no small Consternation.

But, notwithstanding this seeming Desperateness of our State, it may be presum'd, that a right Understanding of this Text, and an Explication of it in it's proper Sense, may dispel such Fears, as, at first View, it gives Rise to; and alleviate and soften the Danger it seems to countenance. It may possibly be evinc'd, that the true and genuine Intent of this Passage, is Not that which first offers itself to our Thoughts; and that the scrupulous Conscience hath no real Grounds from it for Surmises of such Danger, as shall drive it into Despair.

In order to make this manifest, I shall observe the following Method;

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First, I shall Enquire into, and at large lay before you, the true Import of the Text itself, by explaining the several Terms of which it is compos'd.

Secondly, when the Text shall have been at large explain'd, I shall speak to That Difficulty, which seems to arise from it; and by which it is imply'd, or seems to be imply'd, That no Sinner can be a Child of God, or that all Sin is wholly inconsistent with a State of *Regeneration*.

In the Third and Last Place, I shall make a practical Observation on this Text; and which, in Truth is the whole Import and Content of it.

First then, I am to Enquire into, and at large lay before you, the true Import of the Text itself, by explaining the several Terms of which it is compos'd.

Toward discovering the true Import of this Text, it may not be altogether foreign to take Notice of the several Interpretations given of it by such Commentators, as (tho' otherwise of good Account, and of no small Value and Reputation, yet) in this Affair, seem not to have been fortunate and successful in their Conjectures.

Some therefore paraphrase the first Words of this Text [*Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin,*] by [*ought not to commit Sin.*]

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This Interpretation is rather an Evading, than Answering the Difficulty; because the Apostle is here discoursing Not of what the Regenerate Person *ought* to do, but of what he actually doth. And beside this, it is as true of every other Person, as well as the Regenerate, that he ought not to commit Sin; And therefore, this Interpretation cannot come up to the Sense of our Author; since he speaks in this Place of the Regenerate Person only, or of One *born of God*.

Another mistaken Comment affix'd on this Text, is that of some Writers, who, (imagining that these Words cannot be true, if apply'd to the Children of God in this Life, it being impossible they can be so perfect as to commit no Sin,) interpret it of the Sons of God in the Life to come, after the Resurrection, and when indeed it will be their Happiness to be exempted from all Sin. And it gives some Countenance to this Exposition, that the Word *παλιγγενεσία*, or *Regeneration*, (a Term of the same Signification with being born of God,) doth often in Scripture stand to signify the *Resurrection from the Dead*. But, as the Apostle is here declaring, What is the present State of such, as are *born of God*, and Not what their State is to be in the next Life, so this Interpretation seems to be foreign to the Intention of the Writer.

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A farther Sense affix'd on these Words [*Whoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin,*] is, that such a One doth not commit it willingly, and presumptuously, but always with Reluctancy, and with some Abhorrence and Detestation of it even at the Time of Committing it.

But, there are Two Reasons urg'd against this Interpretation; The One, that it seems to add to the Apostle's Sense what the Words will not bear: For, the Apostle doth not so much as insinuate, that he means willingly, or presumptuously; Nor doth he guard his Expression with any Thing that might give us to understand, that the Child of God sins with Reluctancy; but his Words are absolute, and unrestrain'd: He avers expressly, and without Reservation, that the Child of God doth not commit Sin, and cannot do so.

The other Reason against this Interpretation, is, that upon this Supposition, the Guilt of a Child of God in Committing Sin, is rather aggravated and extended, than diminish'd or alleviated; since confessedly greater must be the Crime, which is committed with some Reluctancy, than that which is enter'd on thro' Ignorance or Inadvertency; the Will of the Agent concurring with the former, but not at all with the latter.

The last mistaken Interpretation of these Words

Words, which I shall mention, shall be, that by the Words [*doth not commit Sin,*] is to be understood [*doth not so commit it, that it shall be imputed to him ;*] That whatever be the Failings of the Children of God, and whatever Offences they be guilty of, they shall not be mentioned unto them at the great Day of Account, but be buried in Oblivion, and never rise up in Judgment against them.

To this Exposition it is a sufficient Answer, that as it hath not the least Warrant or Countenance from the Text itself, but is affix'd on it without Ground or Reason, so is it also a Principle of the most dangerous Consequence with relation to Morality; it being evidently a Giving the Reins to all manner of Licentiousness in Men, who think well of their spiritual Condition; and a Giving them Liberty to indulge themselves in any Sin, upon a false Presumption, that as they take themselves to be the Children of God, these their Sins will not be imputed to them.

The several foregoing Interpretations of this Text being (for the Reasons alledg'd) plainly unsatisfactory, let us address ourselves to the more certain Method of discovering their Import, by Enquiring, First into the Occasion of their being written; and, in the next Place, by explaining the several Terms of which it is compos'd.

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The Occasion of these Words of our Apostle was given by the great Presumption and Vanity of the *Gnosticks*. That Sect of Hereticks arrogantly confiding in their suppos'd profound Knowledge of the Mysteries of Religion, pretending to immediate Illuminations from God, and puffed up with imaginary Perfections in themselves, — on this Account they presum'd to call themselves God's Elect, and the Sons of God; they asserted, that they were in a State of perfect Favour with Him; pronounc'd themselves entirely righteous; and, upon this mistaken and ill-grounded Security, took the Liberty to exempt themselves from all the Rules of Morality; they introduc'd all manner of Debauchery, fancying themselves above all these Laws, as being the peculiar Favourites of God, and graciously elected by Him.

To put a Stop to this Extravagancy, St John cautions his Believers throughout all this Chapter, and particularly at Verse the Seventh, in these Words; *Little Children, let no Man deceive You; He that doth Righteousness is righteous, even as Christ is righteous.* In the Eighth Verse he still pursues this Topick, telling them, that *He that committeh Sin, is of the Devil;* and then sums up all at Verse the Ninth, in the Words of the Text, *Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit Sin.*

By

By these few Words we find both the Occasion, and the Drift of the Apostle's Argument: He declares, that these *Gnosticks* cannot be, as they pretended, the Elect Sons and Children of God; because, the Wickedness of their Lives is a Demonstration of the contrary. Since they commit Sin, it must be plain, that they are the *Children of the Devil, who sinned from the Beginning*: And, it is most evident that they are *Not born of God*, because whosoever is so born, *doth not commit Sin*. This was the Occasion, and this seems to be the true Import of this difficult Text; towards the further Illustration of which it will be proper, in the next Place, to explain the several Terms and Expressions of which it is compos'd.

The First of these [*Whosoever is born of God*] will need little Explanation. *To be born of God*, signifies in Scripture Language, to have a Resemblance of Inclinations, and a Similitude of Actions, to God our Father. The Person therefore, who is born of God, is One, who hath receiv'd such Degrees of Influence from Him, as by their Help and Power to be rais'd to a pious and holy Life. He is One, who hath had such a blessed Change wrought in his Heart, by the Operation of God's *Holy Spirit*, as to be translated from the Power of Darkness into the Kingdom of God's Son; sincerely chang'd from all Evil to all Good, and from

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an Obedience to the Flesh to an Obedience to God. He is, in a Word, such an One, as in a continu'd Course, and a permanent fix'd State, lives a pious, and upright, and godly Life.

Of the Person thus describ'd, thus *regenerate*, and thus *born of God*, St *John* affirms, in the next Words, that *he doth not commit Sin*. This is the startling Expression; and in these Words lies all the Difficulty. For the full Understanding of which, it must be here observ'd, that a Man may be said to commit Sin by Two Ways; the One *actually* indeed, but casually and accidentally only, and upon certain Occasions; as thro' Inadvertency, thro' Ignorance, thro' the Frailty of Human Nature: the other customarily and habitually; contrary to Knowledge, to Conviction and the Dictates of Conscience; and daringly, presumptuously, and wilfully.

This Distinction between accidental and casual Sins, and Sins of Habit, Custom, and Presumption, being carefully attended to, will solve all the Difficulty in the Text. It is this latter Sort of Sin, this habitual and customary Sin, which the Apostle affirms a Child of God doth not commit. They are Habits of Sin only, that are inconsistent with a State of *Regeneration*: And it is the Custom of Sin alone which the true Child of God is incapable of contracting.

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That this is the true Sense of this Passage, — that the Apostle speaks here only of habitual, and not of accidental and casual Sins, will appear, if we consider, that the Other Acceptation of it, (i. e. any Acts of Sin accidentally committed,) will make this Assertion in the Text neither true in Fact, nor reconcileable and consistent with other Passages of Scripture.

It is so expressly asserted by St Paul concerning himself, that *the Good which he would do, he did not; and the Evil which he would not, that he did*; It is so positively declar'd by St James, that *in many Things we offend all*; and we have so full an Assurance, that even *the Just Man*, (who surely, if any, may be said to be *born of God*,) *falleth seven Times a Day*; that it cannot be imagin'd, that St John in this Text should intend to say, that he who is *born of God*, doth never fall into any Acts of Sin, so directly contrary to other Passages of the sacred Writings.

Beside this we find in holy Scripture sundry Instances and Examples of Persons *regenerate*, of God's true Sons, and of his most beloved Children, who have thus fallen into single, and those very enormous Acts of Sin, and yet have not forfeited their Titles to the Sonship of God. Of this holy *David*, and St *Peter* are standing Evidences. They surely were Children of God, if ever any were. They fell into the most gross, and blackest Guilt; yet, upon
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penitance were restor'd to God's Favour, and by final Perseverance, died in full Possession of it.

From these Reasons it is most apparent, that when St *John* affirms of the Child of God, that *he doth not commit Sin*, he must be understood to mean only, that he doth not commit habitual Sin; that he doth not allow himself in any known Sin; that by Virtue, and in Consequence of his *Regeneration*, he is above the Commission of customary Sin; and that he doth not indulge himself in what he is sensible is evil. This alone can be the Author's Sense; since, if we take it in the other Acceptation, and suppose him to affirm, that the true Child of God doth never commit any casual, and accidental Act of Sin, his Assertion will neither be true in Fact, (as appears from the Cases of *David* and St *Peter*,) nor reconcileable with the other Scriptures before produc'd, declaring that no Man is exempt from falling into Sin. The Spirit of God, who dictated all these Scriptures, cannot contradict himself: And therefore, we must necessarily bring One Part of Scripture, (in itself perhaps obscure, but whose Words will easily admit the Sense of another more clear Passage,) to be interpreted by that other, which is clearer and less obscure.

But the Apostle goes on in the next Place to affirm, that the Person thus born of God,
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not only *doth not commit Sin*, i. e. as we have found, *doth not contract Habits of Sin*; — but also *cannot sin*. These Words also carry with them some Difficulty. Doth the Apostle hereby imply, that the *Regenerate* Person cannot possibly fall of from that State? Doth he insinuate, that such an One is secure from lapsing into Wickedness? Doth he mean, that a Child of God cannot possibly be chang'd, cannot apostatize, and, by falling into contrary Practices, become at last a Child of the Devil? This cannot be his Meaning. There is no State of Grace, from whence we cannot fall. We are never in such a Degree of Perfection, as to be absolutely secure from revolting. And, whilst we continue to be Men, we shall continue likewise to be frail, and liable to Degeneracy. The Angels themselves fell from their Original Purity into a final Impenitency; and of the selected Body of the Apostles, One apostatiz'd, and became a Devil.

The only Interpretation therefore, which these Words are capable of, is, that he who is *born of God*, and in a State of Regeneration, cannot sin habitually, whilst he continues in that State; i. e. as long as he is a Child of God, he cannot contract Habits of Sin: Not but that he may fall from that State, and then commit Sin; but that whilst he remains in that State, he cannot be so guilty.

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The Expression here us'd, occurs frequently in holy Scripture, in the same Signification I have here put on it. So, when our Saviour says, *A corrupt Tree cannot bring forth good Fruit, nor a good Tree evil Fruit*; And, when St Paul affirms, that *The carnal Mind cannot be subject to God*; it is Not in these Places imply'd, that the Evil Tree cannot be chang'd, and become good; or, that the carnal Mind is incapable of being renew'd, and by that Means of becoming subject to God; but only, that these Effects cannot be produc'd whilst their respective Conditions continue the same. In the same manner the affirming here of the Child of God, the *regenerate*, pious Person, that he cannot sin, is Not the affirming that he cannot cease to be what he is, cannot fall off from the Performance of his Duty; but, that remaining thus, a pious Follower, an Imitator, and so a Child of God, he cannot yield deliberately to Sin, he cannot be guilty of presumptuous and habitual Sinning.

These Two States are inconsistent with each other; They are directly contradictory; and to affirm that a regenerate Person can, at the Time of his being so, be subject to Habits of Sin, is just as good Sense, as it would be to affirm, that a Man may at the same Time be habitually good, and habitually evil.

Having

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Having thus come at the true Signification of this obscure Text, by explaining the several Terms of which it is compos'd, I am now in the

Second Place, to apply what hath been said concerning it, to the Satisfaction of that Scruple and Fear, which hath been founded on it.

All then, that this formidable Text contains, proves at last to be no more than this; That a Child of God, so long as he continues to be so, is not, and cannot be, subject to Habits of Sin; That the *Regenerate* Person, whilst such, cannot indulge him in known, and customary Wickedness; That these States are inconsistent with each other, and mutually destroy each other; That whilst we continue to be true Sons of God, we detest all Habits of Sin; but if we afterwards give into sinful Practices, we fall away from our *regenerate* State, and forfeit our Title to the being God's Children: In a Word, that whilst we follow Sin, we can have no Pretensions to the favour of God.

But, What is there surprizing, or shocking in this? What Foundation for Alarms of Conscience? And, What have we to fear from such a Declaration? Do we not already know, that they who commit Sin, do thereby offend God? Are we not appriz'd, that Habits of Sin set us at the greatest Enmity with Him? Can we be so stupid as to imagine, that we can enjoy his

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Favour, and be call'd his Sons, whilst we are disobedient to his Commands, and violate the most important of his Precepts? Can we think, that a God, who is by Nature infinitely pure and holy, and who abhors all manner of Evil, can be pleas'd with, and reconcil'd to us, whilst we are wallowing in Pollution, and doing Evil with both Hands earnestly? Can it possibly be surprizing, or sound terribly in our Ears, that God should tell us, (what, as I said, is all that this Text contains,) that if we sin wilfully, we shall not continue in his Favour; that the habitual Offender hath no Title to his Sonship; and that, by a Revolt to Sin, we fall from *Regeneration*? Surely our own Reason might dictate to us thus much, (and this is the Sum of this dreadful Passage,) that *Righteousness hath no Fellowship with Unrighteousness*; that *Light hath no Communion with Darkness*; and *Christ no Concord with Belial*.

Did this Text indeed expressly affirm, or were it capable of being so understood, that every involuntary Act of Sin, or every single Transgression into which the best Men fall, thro' Inadvertency, Indiscretion, or Ignorance, did set us at Enmity with God, did forfeit his Favour, did disinherit us from his Sonship, and did subvert or destroy our *Regeneration*, This indeed might reasonably perplex us, and give us just Room for Dread and Consternation.

But,

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But, it hath been, by many Reasons, evinc'd, that this neither is, nor can be the Import of this Text. Single Acts of Sin are not here intended. These are not inconsistent with a *regenerate* State. They are only Habits of wilful and presumptuous Vice, that deprive us of being Heirs of God. And that Such should do so, that God should cast such Men from Him, is not the least Matter of Wonder.

But, to advance one Step farther; Let it be granted that this Text may be understood in the most formidable Sense: Let it be confess'd, (what those Men, who raise to themselves Fears from this Text, do infer and conclude from it,) that not only Habits of Sin, but even single Acts of it, do estrange us from God, forfeit our *Regeneration*, and deprive us of that Sonship; And let our Text be understood in this utmost Latitude, which it can be conceiv'd to bear; yet, even in this Sense, when it is suppos'd to comprehend single Acts of Sin, and to imply, that even such are inconsistent with our being the Children of God; it cannot afford a solid Reason for Despondency, or a just Ground of Horror and Despair.

For, it must be observ'd, that tho' these Sins are here affirm'd to be inconsistent with the Favour of God, and to deprive us for the present of the Benefit of being his Children, yet it is neither here, nor in any other Place im-

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ply'd, that the Favour thus lost, may not again be recover'd; or that we cannot be restor'd to that State, from whence we are fallen. Here is Nothing said, from whence we can conclude, that we cannot be renew'd to Salvation, that our Case is become desperate, that God hath for ever excluded us from his Mercy, and shut up his Bowels of Compassion from us. Of this there is not the least Hint given either here, or elsewhere.

On the contrary, we have the utmost Assurance, that tho' we may have forfeited his Sonship, incurr'd his greatest Displeasure, and made him our Enemy, whether it be by Habits or Acts of Sin; yet upon our true Repentance, upon our Sorrow for what is past, and a Renewal of our Heart to Faith and good Works, He will be ready with open Arms to receive us; He will caress the Prodigal Son, when return'd to his Duty, with a more than fatherly Affection; and will rejoice over the lost Sheep more than over those, which never stray'd from his Bosom.

What hath been said on this Text, is, I hope, sufficient to remove all Scruples and Fears of Conscience, which may be drawn from it. I shall only farther crave your Patience; whilst

In the Third, and Last Place, I raise a practical Observation from this Text; and which

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in Truth, is the whole Import and content of it.

It having been shewn, that the true Sense of this Text is only this, that Habits of Sin knowingly contracted, and presumptuously persever'd in, are absolutely destructive of a *regenerate* State, and inconsistent with our being the Children of God; Let me from hence observe to You the great Danger, as well as manifest Folly of such wilful, and habitual Sinning.

If any such there be among You, (as, I hope, there is not,) who allows himself in any known Sin; who goes on in a customary Practice of what his Conscience tells him he ought not to do; who permits himself in an Habit of, not only the greater and more enormous Vices, but also of those, which are usually, but very unreasonably, esteem'd lighter, more minute, and less considerable; If such there be in this Audience; Let him, towards his Amendment, apply to himself, and seriously weigh in his Conscience, the Declaration of this Text, and the just Denunciation it passes on him. Let him consider, that by this Behaviour, he loses all his Right to the being a Child of God; that he disinherits himself of his heavenly Mansion; and is in actual Rebellion against his Lord and Master. Let him reflect on St *John's* Positions in the Verses next my Text; That in

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This the Children of God are manifested, and the Children of the Devil, since he, who thus committeth Sin, is of the Devil. Let such an one reflect farther, What great Hazard he runs of never returning to the Discharge of his Duty. Habits, when long and willingly indulg'd, grow more powerful and prevalent; urge us with double Force; and in Time commence Masters with an absolute Sway. Let such an one consider, whether his Course of obstinate Sinning be not likely to provoke God to withdraw his Grace from him; to give him up to follow his own Infatuation; and to deliver him to *Satan*, as reprobate and incorrigible. Let such an one be advis'd of What a shameful Weakness and Indiscretion he is guilty, who for the empty, fleeting, vanishing Pleasures of Sin, is content to forgoe the Sweets of a good Conscience, (the greatest Pleasure of this World,) and the Enjoyment of God, (the greatest in the next.) In a Word, Let us all follow after the Things which make for our eternal Peace, before it be too late, and they be hidden from our Eyes.



SERMON

SERMON XVII.

I P E T. IV. 7.

*The End of all Things is at Hand;
Be ye therefore sober, and watch
unto Prayer.*

AMong the several Attempts that have been made to blast the Credit, and to diminish the Authority of the sacred Scriptures, One hath been, to represent the Writers of them as Persons, who have deliver'd certain Opinions, relating to Things at that Time future, as if they would suddenly come to pass, and were to receive an immediate Completion, which yet have never come to pass at all, and which, at this Time, are as unlikely to happen, as they ever were.

There are indeed many Passages in the Writings of The Apostles, which seem to foretel great and singular Events, as if ready to be compleated, and just approaching; which yet, have not been verified, or directly perform'd. And therefore, it may raise a Suspicion, that

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these Prophecies were not inspir'd by *The Holy Ghost*, (whom all *Christians* maintain to be The Author of the Scriptures;) but were written by fallible Men, and who are shewn by the Event to have been greatly mistaken.

The Text, which I have prefix'd to this Discourse, is one of those Parts of holy Scripture, *St Peter* here expressly declares, that *The End of all Things is at Hand*; that is, (as at first View it seems to intend, and as it hath accordingly been by many Men interpreted,) that the End of the World, and the final Consummation of all Things, was then drawing near. And from this great Motive,) as indeed it is confessedly a great one,) he presses the *Christians to be sober, and to watch unto Prayer*.

St Paul also, in many Parts of his Epistles, hath dropt several Expressions, which seem to look the same Way; and to imply, that it was His Belief, that the World had not a much longer Time to subsist; that it's Period drew on; and that the Judgment Day was soon to be expected.

In the *First Epistle to the Thessalonians* Ch. 4. v. 15. he speaks of the general Resurrection, as a Thing that was to be accomplished during his own Life. *We*, says he, *who are [then] alive, and remain unto the Coming of The Lord, shall not prevent them that are asleep. But, v. 17. we which are alive, and remain, shall be caught*

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caught up together with them in the Clouds, to meet The Lord in the Air. And all this he professes to tell them, v. 15. *by the Word of The Lord*; that is, at the Suggestion, and by the Inspiration of God *The Holy Ghost*.

Other Passages there are in the different Epistles of *St Paul*, which seem equally clear to the same Purpose with this; that is, That the Day of final Judgment was then near at Hand; And these perhaps may be produc'd in the Sequel of this Discourse.

If this Doctrine were the true and genuine Import of these Texts of *St Peter* and *St Paul*, it is evident, that they herein advanc'd a false Notion; and alledg'd the Authority and Testimony of *The Holy Spirit* to support a Fact, which the Time since elaps'd hath demonstrated to be untrue. More than *Sixteen Hundred Years* are since pass'd; and yet, as to the Consummation of the World, the general Resurrection, and the final Judgment, *all Things remain as they were since the Fathers fell asleep*.

From this Occasion a plausible Handle hath been taken by the Enemies of the Scripture, and the Faith reveal'd therein, to impeach the Sincerity and Veracity of the Apostles; to pronounce, that such mistaken Assertions can never proceed from God, (as the Writers of them pretend they did;) that God cannot forget an Untruth; that these Men could not be
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under a Divine Inspiration when they wrote these Passages; but, that these are so many Demonstrations, that the Scriptures are merely human Compositions; were penn'd by fallible Men; and consequently, are not to be depended on as Divine Oracles.

The Objection, it must be own'd, carries a fair Shew of Reason and Weight. If The Apostles deliver'd any One Article, or Point of Doctrine, as from *The Holy Spirit* of God, which yet succeeding Ages have experienc'd could not come from that *Spirit*, it is apparent, that their Authority, in all other Points, is at best but precarious; that if they were mistaken in One Point, it is possible they may have been so in Others; that if they were subject to Deceit in some Matters, they may have been so in all; that if they were liable to Error in any Thing, they cannot absolutely be depended on in any Thing; and that the Truth and Certainty of what is contain'd in their Books is justly render'd obnoxious to Suspicion.

This Supposition therefore, is extremely dangerous to our Faith itself: It strikes at the very Root and Foundation of *Christianity*; and subverts the Credit of The Apostles, on whose Veracity and Integrity the whole History of the Gospels relies.

Upon this Account it is well worthy of my Labour,

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Labour, and your Attention, to solve and clear up the Texts before referr'd to; to rescue them from this plausible Charge; to vindicate the first Preachers of our Religion from Imposture and Falshood; and to preserve the Divine Authority of Scripture secure against this Attack upon it.

In Order to this, I shall proceed in the following Method;

First, By shewing You the true Import of these Words of the Text [*The End of all Things is at Hand,*] I shall evince, that *St Peter* did not mean the Consummation and End of the World; and therefore, cannot from this Passage be charg'd with such an Opinion.

Secondly, I shall evince, by many Arguments, that as *St Peter* did not, so neither did *St Paul* believe or teach, that the general Resurrection was then near at Hand; and shall briefly return Answers to such Texts of *St Paul*, as have been thought to countenance and support that Opinion.

Lastly, I shall, in a practical Way, treat of the Two Duties inferr'd from the Proposition in the Text; The being *Sober*, and *Watching unto Prayer*.

First then, I undertake, by shewing you the true Import of these Words of the Text [*The End of all Things is at Hand,*] to evince, that *St Peter* did not mean the Consummation and
End

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End of the World; And therefore, cannot, from this Passage, be charg'd with such an Opinion.

Whatever be the Import of this Expression in the Text, (into which I am to make a stricter Enquiry presently,) it appears from other Passages of *St Peter's* Writings, that he did not imagine, that the Day of Judgment, or the End of the World was near approaching; but, on the contrary, he plainly cautions the *Christians* against the receiving such a Surmise.

For, in his *Second Epistle*, (*Chap. 3. v. 7, 8.*) speaking of *the Heavens and the Earth's being reserv'd unto Fire, against the Day of Judgment, and Perdition of ungodly Men*, he adds in the next Verse, *But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one Thing, that one Day is with The Lord as a Thousand Years, and a Thousand Years as one Day.* This is a plain Admonition to them, not to suffer themselves to be led into a Mistake, or to think the Judgment Day at Hand, because these are called the *last Days*; since, in the Account of God, and with respect to a Being which is infinite, and eternal, even a *Thousand*, or any indefinite greater Number of Years, is but as *One Day*, and *One Day* is as a *Thousand Years*. * So that, according to

* See Dr *Jenkin's Reason, of The Christian Relig.* V. 2. p. 407, 408.

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the Sense of our Apostle, the Scripture Account of *the last Days*, is not to be reckon'd according to human Computation, nor calculated according to our Measures of Days and Times; but with respect to God, who is an Eternal Being, and to whom the whole Duration of Time, is no more than a Point, or a Moment.

And, it is farther observable in Confirmation of this Argument, that in the *Sixteenth Verse* of this very same Chapter, he cautions his Readers not to wrest any Expressions, which might have fallen from St Paul to support this mistaken Notion. *Even, says he, as our beloved Brother Paul also, according to the Wisdom given unto him, hath written unto you; as also in his Epistles, speaking in them of these Things; In which are some Things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearn'd and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures to their own Destruction.*

From all this it is very evident, that St Peter did neither believe, nor teach, that the End of the World was then at Hand; that neither did St Paul write so, (tho' some Men wrested his Words to that Sense;) and therefore, that the Words of this Text give no just Foundation for a Charge of St Peter's entertaining that Error.

From this Consideration it appearing, that
St

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St *Peter* could not by this Expression mean the End of the World, it comes now to be Enquir'd, What is the true and genuine Sense of these Words [*The End of all Things is at Hand.*] Two Interpretations may be given of these Words, Either of which is full and satisfactory.

First, The Words may relate, Not to Things, (as they are render'd in our *English* Translation,) but to Men, or Men's Persons. The Original Greek [*τὸν αἰῶνα*] may be as well construed to relate to Men's Persons, as to Things; and is as often us'd to signify in general the One, as the Other. If we take the Words in this Sense, The Apostle's Meaning will be, That since every Man's Life is of short Continuance, his latter End draweth near, and the Death of the youngest Person is not very far off, This may be a strong Motive to praise the Duties there recommended, the being Sober, and the *Watching unto Prayer*. The Inference which The Apostle makes is altogether as cogent, whether we understand the Passage to relate to the Consummation of Men's Lives, or to the Consummation of the World. And, as the Words will well bear that Construction, it hath accordingly been put on them by many Writers of great Rank and Esteem.

But, there is another Interpretation of these Words, which, I confess, seems to me to be more

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more eligible: And that is, That the End of all Things, here said to be at Hand, is, the End of all Things belonging to the Jewish State; the Destruction of *Jerusalem*; the Burning of their Temple; and the utter Ceasing and Expiring of all the Worship and Service of that People.

It is so well known, that the Destruction and Subversion of that People by the *Romans*, is very often in Scripture Styl'd *The End of all Things*, that it leaves us no Room to doubt, that the same great Event is here alluded to by *St Peter*. So, our Saviour declares, (*Mark 13. v. 30.*) *This Generation shall not pass away, till all these Things [ἡ ἡμετέρα γενεά] be done.* The same Expression occurs in the *Fourth Verse* of the same Chapter; and in both Places is restrain'd to *Jerusalem*. So again, (*Luke 21. v. 32.*) *This Generation shall not pass away, till all [ἡ ἡμετέρα γενεά] be fulfilled:* And the same Words are to be met with in the *Twenty Fifth Chapter* of *Saint Matthew*, at the 34th Verse; in all which Places, the Context restrains the Sense to the Jewish Nation. The Language therefore being the same in all Parts of Scripture, the same Thing must be every where intended; And *The End of all Things* in the Writings of *St Peter*, is doubtless the same with *The End of all Things* in the Discourses of *Christ*.

The Uses and Inferences, which they both draw

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draw from this Event, are exactly the same. As St Peter here advises the *Christians* to be Sober, and to Watch unto Prayer, so our Saviour (Luke 21. v. 35, 36.) exhorts them to take Heed to themselves; not to be over-charg'd with Surfeiting and Drunkenness. And what still adds the greater Weight to this Interpretation, is, that it is the profess'd Design of St Peter throughout both his Epistles, to forewarn the *Christians* of that Age, of the Calamities they were soon to expect in the *Jewish Wars*; and these he calls manifold Temptations, (Chap. 1. v. 6.) fiery Tryals, (Ch. 4. v. 12.) and grievous Persecutions, (Ch. 2, 3, 4, and 5.) All these plainly relate to the State of the *Jewish Affairs*: Against these he encourages and fortifies them: For these he prepares them, as what must soon fall on them; And these are therefore That End of all Things, which is in the Text declar'd to be near at Hand.

Having thus clear'd the Sense of these Words from that Interpretation which hath been put on them, and by which St Peter is suppos'd to have advanc'd a false Doctrine, I proceed

Secondly, to evince by many Arguments, that neither St Peter nor St Paul did believe or teach, that the general Resurrection was then near at Hand; And withal I shall briefly return Answers to such Texts of St Paul, as

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have been thought to countenance and support that Opinion.

When we reflect how many particular and great Events, the holy Scripture informs us, are to precede and be brought to pass before the Time of the general Resurrection, and the Consummation of all Things, (some of which have indeed been fulfill'd since the Apostles Times, but the greater Part are not even yet fulfill'd,) it will soon appear impossible to us, that Either of these Apostles should think the End of the World to be very near at that Time; or indeed, that it can be so even Now. There are in the New Testament sundry Things foretold, as what must necessarily come to pass before the final Consummation. And, as none of these were fulfill'd in the Life Time of these Apostles, so it is absurd to imagine, that they should believe the World near it's End.

Many of these have indeed been fulfill'd since their Deaths: But, as Others of them have not, even as yet, receiv'd a Completion, so it cannot rationally be deem'd, but that the Consummation of all Things, is even yet very distant. I shall briefly enumerate a few of these, for the further illustrating this important, as well as curious Subject.

The Destruction of *Jerusalem* by the *Roman* Arms, is particularly foretold, and punctually

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describ'd by our Saviour himself in the *Twenty Fourth* Chapter of *St Matthew*, as well as in the other Gospels, as what was necessarily to precede the general Consummation. The Apostles, and all other *Christians* were very sensible of this Truth; and therefore made it their Business to prepare their Flocks for the enduring this Tribulation. Is it possible then, that these same Apostles should think that the Day of Judgment was then very near, when at the same Time they knew, that *Jerusalem* was first to be destroy'd, and which themselves too, *St John* only excepted, did not live to see perform'd? Is it consistent with common Reason to surmise, that the Apostles might believe the Day of Judgment near approaching, when they liv'd not to see the least Advances made towards the Destruction of a Place, which they were assur'd must go before the End of the World? This is entirely incredible.

But farther, The Apostles not only knew that *Jerusalem* was to be destroy'd before the general Consummation, but also, that many other Prophecies, relating to that City and Nation, were first to be compleated; and those too such, as would necessarily take up no small Space of Time. So our Saviour had told them, (*Luke 21. v. 29.*) that *the Jews should be led away captive into all Nations, and Jerusalem be trodden*

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trodden down of the Gentiles, until the Times of the Gentiles should be fulfill'd. This Prophecy evidently foreshews, that after *Jerusalem* should be subverted by the *Romans*, it was to be subjected to a Gentile Yoke; that the *Jews* should no more have Possession of, or Dominion over it; but that it should be trodden down by the Gentile Powers, 'till a certain fix'd, and determin'd Number of Years should expire. How long that Space was to continue, it is highly probable was reveal'd to *Daniel*, and is set down at the *Seventh* Verse of his *Twelfth* Chapter. It is there call'd *a Time, Times, and an Half*. But, as God hath not thought fit expressly and clearly to declare the determin'd Season, it becomes us not to be either too peremptory about it, or too inquisitive after it. Thus much is certain upon the whole, that our Saviour had foretold to his Apostles, that *Jerusalem was to be trodden down*, and for a Time to be subjected to the *Gentile Nations*; The Apostles could not, for this Reason, judge the World to be near it's End; since all this was to be accomplish'd before that End.

Again, it cannot be suppos'd, that The Apostles should either believe or teach, that the final Consummation of all Things was near approaching in their Days, since they well knew, that according to the Prophecies of the Old

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Testament, the whole Earth is first to be converted to the Gospel of *Christ*, and the *Christian* Religion to be establish'd in every Part of it. In the *Second Psalm*, God promis'd his Son the *Heathen* for his *Inheritance*, and the utmost Parts of the *Earth* for his *Possession*. He had promis'd *Abraham*, that in his *Seed*, i.e. in *Christ*, should all the *Nations* of the *Earth* be blessed. It had been declar'd by *Daniel*, that all *People*, *Nations* and *Languages*, should serve him; by *Micah*, that The *Lord* should be *King* over all the *Earth*; by *Zechariah*, that there should be but *One Lord*, and his *Name One*; and by The *Royal Psalmist*, that he should have *Dominion* from *Sea to Sea*; and from the *River* to the *Ends of the Earth*; — that all *Kings* should fall down before *Him*; that the *Kingdom* should be the *Lord's*, and that He should govern among the *Nations*. All these are positive *Declarations*, that the *Banners of the Cross* are to be display'd to all *Nations*; that all *Opposition* is to fall before it; that *Christianity* is to triumph in the *Ruin* of all other *Religions*; and that the *Kingdom of Christ* is to be universally establish'd before the general *Consummation* of the *World*.

But, as a very small Progress was herein made during the *Lives* of The *Apostles*, so it is absurd to imagine, that it was their *Opinion*,

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nion, that the End of all Things was then at Hand. And, as in these our Days the Proportion which *Christendom* bears in the Earth, when compar'd with the Extent of several false Religions, is small and inconsiderable; so it is very reasonable to conclude, that the final Consummation of all Things is still at a great Distance from us.

Another Argument to shew, that The Apostles did not surmise, that the World was then near it's End, is, that as they knew that *Christianity* was to be universally propagated, so they taught that this great Event should be follow'd by a total Conversion of the *Jewish* Nation; that That obstinate People should likewise come in to the Acknowledgment of *Christ*, and at last give up their Names to the true *Messiah*. So St Paul expressly avers, (*Romans* II. v. 25, 26.) *I would not Brethren that ye should be ignorant of this Mystery, that Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the Fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved; as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away Ungodliness from Jacob.* And again, in the Second to the *Corinthians*, (*Ch. 3. v. 14.*) speaking of the *Jews* he says, *Their Minds are blinded; for until this Day remaineth the Veil un-taken away.* Nevertheless, when it shall turn to The

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Lord, the Veil shall be taken away. This is plainly asserting, that together with the *Gentiles*, the *Jews* also shall receive *Christianity*; that there shall be but One Fold, and One Shepherd; that both the natural, and engrafted Branches shall become but One Olive Tree; and the Middle Wall of Partition be effectually broken down. This surprising Event The Apostle tells us is to precede the last Times; But, as this had not been accomplish'd in His Days, nor is yet brought to pass in Ours, it is incredible He should give in to the Opinion charg'd on him.

Again, that The Apostles had no such Opinion of the near Approach of the last Day, as hath been ascrib'd to them from this, and other mistaken Texts, is evident, if we reflect, that in That Revelation which was made to *St John*, during his Banishment into *Patmos*, (and which is contain'd in That Book of the New Testament which carries that Name,) The future State of the *Christian Church*, militant on Earth, is, in a Prophetick Manner describ'd for the Space of many Ages. The Book itself is indeed Obscure and Intricate, as Prophecies always are, till their Completion explains, and makes them obvious. But, as this was known to be a Prediction relating to the succeeding Ages of the Church; so it was a Demon-

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Demonstration, that the Church was to continue to many succeeding Ages; And consequently, it could not be suppos'd, that in That Age, both the World, and the Church militant with it, drew near it's End.

From these Reasons it appears, that The Apostles could not maintain this mistaken Sentiment, which hath been charg'd on them. But, since it hath been more particularly objected to *St Paul*; and since He hath been conceiv'd, more expressly, to have gone far into the Notion, even beyond the other Apostles; I shall briefly produce a Passage or Two from the Writings of that Apostle, which will abundantly evince the Weakness of this Asper-sion.

So far then was *St Paul* from thinking, that the End of all Things drew near, or that the World was to have a Period during his Life Time, that he speaks of his own Death, as what he soon expected, and which he was confident, was at a small Distance. So in the *Second of Timothy*, (*Ch. 4. v. 6.*) He says of himself, *I am now ready to be offer'd, and the Time of my Departure is at Hand.* No Man could write this, who should at the same Time believe, that he was to see the final Consummation during his own Life; it being too great an Absurdity to be by any Man entertain'd,

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that He shall soon be put to Death by the Malice of his Persecutors, and yet shall be alive at the End of all Things.

Nay, what puts it beyond all Doubt, that *St Paul* held no such Doctrine concerning the Nearness of the last Day, is, that in his *Second Chapter* of the *Second Epistle* to the *Thessalonians*, v. 1. and onward, He expressly cautions his Readers against the receiving any such Notion, and guards their Minds against the erroneous Impression. *We beseech you, Brethren, saith he, by the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye be not soon shaken in Mind, or be troubled, neither by Spirit, nor by Word, nor by Letter as from us, as that the Day of Christ is at Hand. Let no Man deceive you by any Means: For that Day shall not come, except there come a Falling-away first, and that Man of Sin be revealed, the Son of Perdition.* In the following Verses he goes on to describe the general Apostacy of the latter Times, and the Revelation of *Antichrist* to be therein made. All this is a Demonstration that *St Paul* had no Apprehensions of the Approach of the last Day; because, he not only cautions the *Christians* against such an Apprehension, but also particularly describes the State of *Antichrist*, who was to be the Produce of After-ages.

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Before I close this Head, I am briefly to return Answers to such Texts of *St Paul*, as have been thought to countenance and support this Charge. These are chiefly Two Passages, in which he speaks of himself as One, who was to be of the Number of the Living at the Time of the Resurrection.

Thus, in the *First* to the *Corinthians*, (*Ch. 15. v. 51.*) he says, *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.* And in the *Fourth Chapter* of the *First* to the *Thessalonians*, *v. 16, 17.* *We which are alive and remain unto the Coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them which are asleep; But, we which are alive, and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the Clouds, to meet The Lord in the Air.* From these Expressions an Handle hath been taken to impute to this Apostle a firm Belief, that himself was to be among the Living at the Second Coming of our Lord.

But indeed Nothing of this Assertion can be collected from these Words. Nothing is more frequent, than Expressions of this Kind, when an Author is speaking of his own Nation, Age, or Profession; And the Scriptures furnish us with numberless Examples of it. *David* speaking of the *Israelites* Passage dry-lhod thro' *Jordan*, says, *There did we rejoice thereof;* In which Words it is not supposed, that *David* was present,

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sent, and was One of those who rejoic'd; But, by the Term [*We*] he means, the then *Jewish* Nation, the People from whom he was descended, and the Tribes to which he belong'd. It were needless to multiply Instances in a Case so frequent, and so obvious to common Observation.

It is usual and ordinary with all Writers, when they speak of any Thing long since done, or hereafter to be done by their own Nation or People, to express themselves in this Form; *We*, [that is, the People of my own Nation,] perform'd such an Action; and *We* hereafter shall do thus, or thus; Yet no Man can infer from these Expressions, that the Author and Writer of them bore any Part in the Action which is related as pass'd, or is to have a personal share in that which is future.

In the same Manner is *St. Paul* to be understood in these Texts, When he mentions [*We who are alive and remain;*] he understands by them, the then Body of *Christians*, the Men of his own Sect, Profession and Persuasion, who shall at that Time be alive; with whom, as you have seen, it is no Impropriety, or Novelty of Speech to join himself, as then present, or One of their Number and Body.

Having thus, at large explain'd, and accounted for these Texts; Vindicated the Apostles

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files from the Asperſion of having taught an Erroneous Doctrine; and thereby freed our holy Religion from that Wound, which from hence had been given it thro' their Sides, I proceed in the

Last Place, in a practical Manner to treat of the Two Duties inferr'd from the Propoſition in the Text; The being *Sober*, and the *Watching unto Prayer*.

The Original Word [*σωφρονισμός*] here render'd, *Be ye Sober*, is of a very large and extensive Signification, and hath many different Acceptations in the New Testament; but, which will all comport and agree with it, as it ſtands in this Text, and which therefore we may ſuppoſe to be included in it.

It ſometimes ſignifies to behave ones ſelf *modestly and decently*; and is us'd in this Senſe in the *Second to Titus*, verſe the *Sixth*. At other Times it ſignifies, to act with *Moderation and Prudence*, in Oppoſition to *Raſhneſs, Temerity, or Over-doing*; and in this Acceptation it occurs in the *Second to the Corinthians*, *Ch. 5. v. 13*. In other Places of Scripture, The being *Sober*, is a Term equivalent to the being *Sober-minded*; and in theſe Places it is preſum'd to comprehend the wiſe Regulation of our Thoughts, the Soundneſs and Truth of our Opinions, the Steadineſs and Uniformity of

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of our Principles, the Government and Mastery of our Desires, and the Prudent Conduct of our Passions. All these several Duties are recommended to our Practice in the reveal'd Will of God under the Name, and Style of *Sobriety*, and in this Latitude fall within the Injunction contain'd in the Text.

But, it must withal be observ'd, that the Sobriety here commanded, is most probably that Virtue, which consists in a moderate Use of, and is oppos'd to Excess in, the Pleasures and Enjoyments which gratify the Senses. It is the same with Temperance in the Use of lawful Pleasures; and consists in Purity of Body, and moderate Indulgence in Meats and Drinks.

That this is the Sobriety intended by St. Peter, will appear by comparing the Exhortations, which this Apostle here gives the Jews, from the approaching Destruction of *Jerusalem*, with those which our Saviour himself, in his Life Time, had given them upon the very same Occasion. For, after He had particularly, and minutely describ'd to his Disciples the Siege of *Jerusalem*, and Subversion of the Temple, in the *Twenty First* Chapter of Saint *Luke's Gospel*, He closes his Prophecy at the 34th Verse with this practical Instruction, *Take Heed to yourselves, lest at any Time your Hearts*

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be over-charg'd with Surfeiting, and Drunkenness, and Cares of this Life; and so that Day come upon You unawares. These Words of *Christ* are the best Comment on *St Peter's*, which are on the same Subject. The *Sobriety* of the Apostle is, no Doubt, the Caution against *Surfeiting* and *Drunkenness* by our Saviour; and Both are to be understood to recommend the great Duty of Temperance, as that is oppos'd to Excess in carnal Pleasures.

But Lastly, The Apostle adds to *Sobriety* a *Watchfulness unto Prayer*. His great Master also had enjoyn'd this Duty on the same Occasion, and in the before-cited Place, in these Words, *Watch ye therefore, and pray always*. Watchfulness therefore unto Prayer, is, in the Language of our Saviour, the *Praying always*; Not indeed the incessant, uninterrupted invocation of God; Not the continually being on our Knees; — but, the Slipping no Opportunity of either Publick or Private Devotion; the gladly Embracing every Occasion of Prayer; the chearfully Treading God's Courts, and Entering his Gates with Songs of Thanksgiving.

The present Time will not admit of my Treating on these Two great Duties of Temperance and Devotion, farther than by putting you in Mind, that as these were more especially recommended to the *Christians* by
both

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both our Saviour and St Peter, upon Occasion of that great impending Calamity, the Overthrow of *Jerusalem*, so they are no less proper for the Imitation of this Age; the Wickedness of which falls little short of that of the *Jews*; and which it is to be fear'd, may in Time be follow'd, without Repentance, by as eminent a Destruction.

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- I. **T**HE Personality and Divinity of The Holy Ghost prov'd from Scripture, and the Ante-Nicene Fathers. A Sermon preach'd before the University of Oxford, Feb. 24. 17¹⁶/₁₇. Publish'd at the Request of Mr Vice-Chancellor.
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